

Andreas Peglau



Menschen als Marionetten?

Wie Marx und Engels die reale Psyche
in ihrer Lehre verdrängten

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People as puppets?

How Marx and Engels suppressed
the real psyche in their teaching



It could have been Karl Marx ... Found in the courtyard of Burg Giebichenstein, University of Art and Design in Halle an der Saale, on 12 June 2024 (photo: Gudrun Peters)

This is a DeepL translation I have not checked.

I apologize for any errors and inaccuracies that are sure to occur.

Please use the original German text, written in 2024, for comparison:

<https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/menschen-als-marionetten-wie-marx-und-engels-die-reale-psyche-in-ihre-lehre-verdraengten/>).

A.P.

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Starting points

Today, as the US-led "West" accepts the destruction of the entire planet in order to maintain its "rules-based" hegemony, there is a greater need than ever to find alternatives to irresponsible greed for profit and power, warmongering and hostility towards life.

Socialism, which had been tried out in practice, at least to some extent, in several countries, was seen as such an alternative. Its most important theoretical starting point was the teachings of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), which were often distorted in the context of 'Marxism-Leninism'. "Real socialism" was massively discredited early on, particularly by state terror under Stalin and later under Mao Tse Tung and Pol Pot, and collapsed around 1990. Since then, such concepts have generally been considered permanently discredited, and capitalism has been regarded as without alternative.

Precisely because Marx and Engels sensibly did not even attempt to draft programmes for future societies, it is wrong to blame them for their failure. In any case, they bear no responsibility for state terror.

Anyone who does not yet know or does not want to know that systems based on capitalist exploitation are unjust and should therefore be "overthrown", who wants to understand the important socio-economic dependencies and interrelationships underlying these systems, who is interested in the assumptions derived from them about past and future social orders, can still draw much of value from the legacy of Marx and Engels.

The relevance of their social criticism is documented by these demands alone, written for a leaflet in March 1848:¹

- free "administration of justice", i.e. an actual, not just for the wealthy,
- the conversion of all "princely and other feudal estates, all mines, etc. [...] into state property",
- a "state bank" to replace "all private banks", which would regulate the "credit system in the interests of the *whole* people" and "thus undermining the rule of the big financiers",
- the nationalisation of all "means of transport: railways, canals, steamships, roads, Items etc. that should thus be "made available free of charge to the poor"
- equal "remuneration for all civil servants" with the sole exception that "those *with* families, i.e. with greater needs, also receive a higher salary than the others",
- "complete separation of church and state",
- "restriction of inheritance rights",
- "introduction of strong progressive taxes and abolition of consumption taxes",
- "establishment of national workshops", whereby the state "guarantees all workers their livelihood and providing for those unable to work."

They emphasised that the state they had in mind was a truly democratic one, designed in the interests of the masses:

"It is in the interest of the German proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry to work with all their energy to implement the above measures. For only by implementing them can the millions who have hitherto been exploited in Germany by a small

¹ Marx/Engels 1959, p. 3f. The following quotations: *ibid.*

number and who will continue to be oppressed obtain their rights and the power that is due to them as the producers of all wealth."²

But can we deduce from this objective, which is as justified as it is unfulfilled in the Federal Republic of Germany, that the teachings of Marx and Engels³ contain conclusive assumptions about how their list of demands can be implemented, how exploitation and oppression can be ended – or even the intellectual tools to use our current national and global crisis for constructive change?⁴

No. For this doctrine is not only incomplete, limited in content and scope⁵ and partly out-dated. Above all, it suffers from a cardinal error that has never been corrected: the "economic" exclusion of the real psyche⁶ – and thus the exclusion of what is decisive about being human. It therefore offers no basis for adequately understanding, let alone *solving*, social problems that always extend beyond the economic sphere. I will demonstrate this in Part 1 of my text, which takes up most of the space.

It was not easy for me to allow this insight, which was so new to me in its sharpness, to take hold and to say goodbye to the illusions that still remained⁷. Sometimes the feelings this triggered were reflected in my tone of voice. It does not change the substance of my criticism.

Why do I think it is worthwhile to write down this criticism? Because it is important not to stare in a direction from which necessary solutions *cannot come*. And to encourage those who are looking for such solutions to consider other approaches.

In particular, the psychoanalysts and social scientists Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm went far beyond Marx and Engels decades ago in terms of integrating psychosocial circumstances. As I have long been involved in popularising Reich's work, I will only occasionally refer to it here; detailed information can be found on my website.⁸

In the short second part of this text, I will outline my thoughts on four important aspects of Marx and Engels' teachings, taking into account the views that I consider relevant, as a stimulus for discussion.

² Ibid., p. 4f.

³ Their teachings are not identical with what has become known as "Marxism," and even less so with "Marxism-Leninism." According to Engels, Marx was at least ambivalent about being labelled a "Marxist" himself (Hoffmann 2018, p. 1f., cf. Krätke 1999, Fn1). After Engels' death, simplification and "vulgarisation" set in (Heinrich 2021, pp. 23–26), followed later by a split into opposing, sometimes hostile "Marxisms" (Adler 1972, pp. 5–11; Haug 1985, pp. 25–29; Harman 1986; Morina 2017; Kolias 2020; Baier 2023). The term "Marxism" also has an authoritarian, unscientific connotation: instead of defining a body of ideas, it iconises a person. No one would think of renaming physics "Einsteinism." In 1877, Marx also emphasised his "aversion to all personality cults" in a letter: His and Engels' entry into what later became the "Communist League" in 1847 was "only on condition" that "everything that was conducive to the superstition of authority" be removed from the statutes (Marx/Engels 1966, p. 308).

⁴ Marx left behind an unfinished work. Engels rounded off Marx's work on a number of points, applied Marx's and his own theses to other areas, popularised – some say watered down – their teachings, and is sometimes referred to as the "inventor" of Marxism (Krader 1973, pp. 124–136; Krätke 2020, pp. 9–68; Hunt 2021; Rapic 2022).

⁵ See, among others, Thompson 1980, p. 109; Anderson 2023, pp. 114–124.

⁶ Statements that (also) touch on the psychological can be found – in Marx's case, particularly in his "early writings" – primarily in connection with "sensual"/"senses", "spiritual"/"spirit" or "conscious"/"consciousness". Sometimes "spiritual"/"soul" is used, very rarely "psychological"/"psyche" or "psychology" – the latter appears four times in *The German Ideology* (Marx/Engels 2017), but not at all in the three volumes of *Capital*. Often, the focus is not on people, but on things, circumstances, conditions, philosophical concepts. The fact that Marx and Engels rarely addressed mental processes explicitly is evidenced by the desperate attempts to later attribute to them a kind of guiding authority for "socialist psychology". Scattered sentences were then usually upgraded as evidence of an "internally consistent system of ideas [...], a closed whole" with which Marx had mapped out "paths for the construction of psychology" (Rubinstein 1981, p. 11).

⁷ I describe the beginning of this process of separation in Peglau 2001.

⁸ <https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/> On Reich: <https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/tag/reich/>. Detailed information on Fromm: <https://fromm-gesellschaft.eu/>.

What gives me the right to make these claims?

There were plenty of opportunities to read Marx and Engels in GDR schools. Marxism-Leninism ("ML") was part of every GDR course of study, including my training as a psychologist. But I never attempted to explore the complete works of the "socialist classics"; I often limited myself to excerpts, biographies, summaries and secondary literature. This raises the suspicion that what I am missing can be found elsewhere in the more than 40 volumes of the Marx-Engels Works edition.⁹ However, as will become apparent, even though alternative ideas occasionally flashed through their minds, Marx and Engels had already settled on a general approach from 1845 onwards that left no room for an appropriate appreciation of psychological insights.¹⁰

This approach was essentially retained in the mainstream of Marxism.¹¹ Although I am not familiar with the entirety of Marxist literature, I am certain that psychological issues do not receive the attention they deserve.¹² Otherwise, Reich and Fromm – who, more profoundly than other Marxists, linked their ideas to valid insights from depth psychology¹³ – would be frequently cited and highly regarded as inspirers of 'left-wing' discussions. This is definitely not the case.¹⁴

One final preliminary remark. When my text refers to a desirable future, I will mostly speak of a "humane order" rather than "socialism." The term socialism, like communism, is not clearly defined and has been and continues to be used in very different ways,¹⁵ often

⁹ See: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx-Engels-Werke>. On MEGA: <https://mega.bbaw.de/de>.

¹⁰ Fromm (1989a, pp. 335–432) assessed this more positively, primarily on the basis of Marx's "early writings". I agree with him insofar as Marx, until 1844, partly advocated theses that would have made a more holistic theory *possible* (see also Lange 1955, pp. 30–33) and that were also stimulating for psychology.

¹¹ The proponents of "real socialism" (e.g. Kosing 1970; Bitschko 1970) largely ignored or opposed "Western Marxism," which included Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Jean Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser – whom Thompson (1980) classifies as Stalinists – and the "Frankfurt School." Anderson (2023, pp. 58–100) is critical of these "Western" variants of Marxism, among other things because, lacking revolutionary practice, they tended towards abstract theory and language and a pessimistic view of humanity and society, often falling back from wanting to change the world to merely interpreting it, and in Horkheimer's case ultimately even to an "unspeakable apology for capitalism". Dahmer (2022, p. 9) counts Leon Trotsky among "Western Marxism," while Anderson (2023, p. 102) sees him as positively distinct from it. Both acknowledge Trotsky's outstanding importance for the further development of Marxism; Dahmer (2022, pp. 33–75) also because of Trotsky's – not very profound – interest in psychoanalysis.

¹² This is confirmed by Gehrke (2011), among others. This *polemic on the programme of the left*, published under the motto "To overturn all conditions ...", is far from even naming "all" conditions, let alone discussing how they can be researched and overturned. In her book *Reichtum ohne Gier* (Wealth without Greed, 2016), Sahra Wagenknecht does mention the psyche in the title, but only briefly addresses the topic of images of humanity at the beginning – only to return to the economy for the rest of the book. In Michael Brie's (2021) attempt to *rediscover socialism*, the psyche, education, childhood, sexuality and the image of humanity play virtually no role, except for a nine-line reference to the psychiatrist and neuroimmunologist Joachim Bauer (*ibid.*, p. 122).

¹³ Depth psychology was also incorporated by the Frankfurt School. However, its validity suffers considerably, particularly in the case of its most well-known representatives (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse), due to the fact that they adopted the late Freud's pessimistic view of human nature, which was partly detached from reality and included the "death drive" (see Peglau 2018b). Moreover, how could the "association of free people" hoped for by Marx be formed with beings who are antisocial, destructive and murderous from birth? Instead of freedom, constant control, oppression or "brainwashing" would be inevitable. On how Adorno adopted key insights from Fromm and Reich in *The Authoritarian Personality* without naming their authorship, see Peglau 2018a, p. 99f.

¹⁴ Haug (1985), Harman (1986), Morina (2017) and Anderson (2023) mention either Reich or Fromm, although Anderson discusses in detail the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, to which Fromm belonged until 1939 and where Reich courageously implemented the combination of theory and practice desired by Anderson until the mid-1930s (Pegla 2017a, pp. 88–145, 311–345). The afterword to Anderson's work, first published in German in 1978 and supplemented in 2023, does not fill this gap. Baier (2023, pp. 231–235) does at least acknowledge Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Reich 2020) and Fromm's study *Workers and Employees on the Eve of the Third Reich* (Fromm 1989b). He also fails to recognise how fundamentally Reich and Fromm could have challenged and enriched Marxism.

¹⁵ See Mittelstraß 2004, vol. 3, pp. 857–859. The distinction between the terms "socialism" and "communism" (*ibid.*, pp. 425f.) is also vague. Marx and Engels initially used both terms synonymously (Hunt 2021, pp. 91f.), but soon began to distinguish between them more clearly, later attaching less importance to this distinction (cf. Engels 1977b, pp. 580f.).

misused, not least in "National Socialism." *A humane order*¹⁶ strikes me as hitting the nail on the head. This is also likely to be in line with the 25-year-old Marx, who established the "categorical imperative" to "overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being".¹⁷ Some 130 years later, Erich Fromm concretised this in the image of a society "in which no one need feel threatened: not the child by its parents; not the parents by those above them; not one social class by another; not one nation by a super-power".¹⁸

I still have no doubt whatsoever about our *fundamental* ability to build such a society. By nature, we are social, lovable, capable of love and in need of love, sociable, inquisitive and creative beings.¹⁹ Every human being is born with the potential for a new beginning.

¹⁶ This also needs to be defined more precisely, but it can be used more effectively as a starting point for verifiable social science questions.

¹⁷ Marx 1976a, p. 385.

¹⁸ Fromm 1989c, p. 395.

¹⁹ Peglau 2023; 2024b.

PART 1:

People as puppets

Repression

Scientific psychology was still in its infancy in the mid-19th century.²⁰ However, since ancient times, a multitude of psychological insights and theories had been formulated, not least by philosophers. Moreover, the psyche is not something that one needs to learn about from specialist books: everyone has one, and we are constantly dealing with it. Anyone who judges people while ignoring psychological factors is denying their own experience of reality – or repressing it.

Something is repressed, "shifted" into the unconscious, when it is perceived as so unsettling or threatening that it can no longer be tolerated in the conscious mind. However, since the repressed does not cease to exist as a result, but pushes its way back into consciousness, this shift must be constantly maintained and renewed. This happens unconsciously and is not controlled by the will.

I believe that Marx and Engels *were* only *able* to put forward a significant portion of their often seemingly irrefutable theses by adopting what was ultimately an anti-psychological stance. If they had incorporated a more realistic view of human nature, many things would have appeared far more complex and complicated, and various of their statements would have been revealed as absurd, at least in their absoluteness or generalisation. Dealing with the psyche would therefore have severely limited the far-reaching claims to validity and explanation asserted by Marx and Engels and invalidated a number of their core statements. At the same time, this would have threatened Marx and Engels: their self-image, their self-esteem, their idea of the significance of their life's work. Understandable reasons for repression.

What I am outlining here is not a problem specific to Marx and Engels. Authoritarian-patriarchal family and social structures, in which they too grew up, inevitably cause psychic disturbances,²¹ always affecting self-esteem. In order not to have to face up to this, one can try to compensate for ingrained feelings of inferiority with exaggerated notions of one's own importance.

Marx and Engels began the collection of texts later known as *The German Ideology* in October 1845 with a sentence that was symptomatic in this regard, devaluing the millennia of reflection that had preceded them: "People have always had false ideas about themselves, about what they are or should be."²² But now, they said, 24-year-old Friedrich Engels and 27-year-old Karl Marx had arrived and would finally explain to people who they were. But they did so only to a very limited extent.

"Max Stirner"

In addition to their desire to free themselves uncompromisingly from everything "idealistic," such self-esteem issues may have been the background for Marx and Engels' rigid

²⁰ Mittelstraß 2004, vol. 3, p. 396.

²¹ Little is known about Marx's childhood. His father seems to have been relatively tolerant, but put him under pressure to succeed and delegated his own goals to him: "I wish to see in you what I might have become if I had been born under equally favourable auspices [omens]. You can fulfil or destroy my fondest hopes" (Heinrich 2018, p. 125f.). The fact that his mother wrote to 17-year-old Karl demanding that he scrub himself "weekly with a sponge [sic] and soap" (ibid., p. 143) sounds like overprotective nagging. This may have created a mixture of excessive ambition and feelings of inferiority that Marx struggled with throughout his life. It cannot be ruled out that the bourgeois families of Marx and Engels were non-authoritarian islands in the authoritarian Prussian state. Engels' father complained that 15-year-old Friedrich, "despite earlier severe punishments [...] did not learn unconditional obedience, even out of fear of punishment". Engels later distanced himself from the "fanatical and despotic old man" (Hunt 2021, p. 29).

²² Marx/Engels 2017, p. 3.

distinctions from some philosophical precursors and contemporary competitors, especially Johann Caspar Schmidt (1806–1856).²³

Schmidt had in common with Marx and Engels that in 1844 they could already look back on a comparatively extensive journalistic career, belonged to the followers of the philosopher Hegel, often referred to as "Young Hegelians",²⁴ and had until recently harboured hopes for positive political change in Germany, especially in Prussia.

However, the accession of Frederick William IV to the throne in 1840 had brought about a restoration of ecclesiastical-feudal power instead of the longed-for greater freedom for social criticism, especially anti-religious criticism. Since the Young Hegelians regarded religion as the most important pillar of the state, they believed that this social criticism could bring about "a social upheaval comparable to the French Revolution"²⁵: revolution through "enlightenment". But not only had the new Prussian monarch disappointed the expectations placed in him.²⁶ Unlike in France in 1789, the liberal bourgeoisie, and ultimately the entire population, offered no significant resistance to the resurgent feudal regime. The decisive assumptions of the "Young Hegelians" thus proved to be illusory. New sources of hope, new explanatory models and new paths to revolution had to be found.²⁷

This led Marx and Engels to place their hopes in the emerging proletariat as the new, most exploited class and to interpret the "history of all previous society" as the economically determined "history of class struggles".²⁸ Gradually, they developed what Engels retrospectively called "historical materialism" in 1892, namely a "conception of the course of world history that sees the ultimate cause and decisive driving force of all important historical events in the economic development of society".²⁹

Johann Caspar Schmidt came to a completely different conclusion. He chose the individual as his beacon of hope, who was prevented from developing their personality and satisfying their needs by authoritarian nuclear families and education, sexual repression and egalitarian ideologies such as Christianity.³⁰ Schmidt saw the way out in taking oneself as the only yardstick, forcing one's own unique path against the restrictive society. Instead of "selflessly serving a leader, ruler, god or other 'great egoists' from afar," he now wanted to "be the egoist himself" – this is how Schmidt summarised his ideal in 1844 in the book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum (The Ego and Its Own)*.³¹

To avoid the expected state reprisals for his rebellious text, he published it under the pseudonym "Max Stirner". In fact, the work was banned shortly after its publication.³²

Engels, who was friends with "Stirner", initially responded to his writing with benevolent criticism. On 19 November 1844, he wrote to Marx:

"We must not discard it, but [...] build on it *by turning it around*. [...] First, it is a trifling matter to prove to St.[irner] that his egoistic people must necessarily become

²³ Pagel 2020, p. 24.

²⁴ On this classification and why it is only of limited help: Heinrich 2018, pp. 302–308.

²⁵ Pagel 2020, p. 25.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 50f.

²⁷ For details, see *ibid.*, in particular pp. 42–302.

²⁸ Marx/Engels 1959, p. 462.

²⁹ Engels 1972, p. 298.

³⁰ In doing so, he anticipated some of the ideas that were pointedly advocated in the 20th century by Wilhelm Reich (2018; 2020), among others.

³¹ Stirner 2016, quotation p. 14f. On Stirner, see also Eßbach 1982; Korfmacher 2001; Pagel 2020; Laska 2024.

³² Ibid. pp. 20–24.

communists out of pure egoism. [...] Secondly, he must be told that the human heart is, from the outset, immediately, in its egoism, unselfish and sacrificial [...]."³³

These "few trivialities" should suffice to refute Stirner's "*one-sidedness*. But what is true about the principle," Engels continues,

"we must also accept. And what is true about it is that we must first make a thing our own, selfish thing before we can do anything for it – that in this sense [...] we are also communists out of egoism. [...] We must start from the ego, from the empirical, embodied individual."³⁴

Starting from *the self*, the individual and a positive, (now proven³⁵) *realistic* view of humanity, recognising psychological motives and internalised goals as the basis for commitment to social change, becoming a communist out of healthy egoism – what a constructive approach this could have been for a worldview,³⁶ that was truly worthy of the name!

But Marx had already set a course in which he wanted to classify Stirner only as an opponent. In addition, Stirner had now been the first to publish some ideas that were still maturing in Marx's mind³⁷ – and he had been *successful*. Even Ludwig Feuerbach, at that time the undisputed number one in the discourse of the "Young Hegelians", considered *The Ego and Its Own* worthy of a detailed public response.³⁸ This was tantamount to "promoting Stirner to the front row" of the philosophers of the time,³⁹ making him the "big fish" in Marx's "self-proclaimed fishpond".⁴⁰

Marx seems to have responded rather harshly to Engels' letter. Engels relented,⁴¹ submitted to Marx and was now to devalue himself in comparison with Marx for the rest of his life – unjustly so.⁴²

In 1845/46, both undertook what⁴³ described as the "most intense individual debate" they had "ever had with a thinker".⁴⁴ For eight months, in almost 450 manuscript pages,⁴⁵ they endeavoured to refute Stirner. In doing so, they defamed him in a petty and spiteful manner, subjecting him, as Stirner biographer Bernd Laska writes, to a "barrage" of insults and,⁴⁶ among other things, denigrating him as the "weakest and most ignorant" of the "entire

³³ Marx/Engels 1975, p. 252.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hüther 2003; Solms/Turnbull 2004, pp. 138ff., 148; Tomasello 2010; Klein 2011; Bauer 2011; Bregman 2020.

³⁶ In 1886, Engels (1975a, pp. 263f.) explicitly used this term for the doctrine established by Marx and himself.

³⁷ On the similarities with Stirner that Marx and Engels did not acknowledge: Eßbach 1982, in particular pp. 38–62.

³⁸ Although Feuerbach wrote anonymously, his authorship was "no secret" to insiders such as Marx and Engels (Pagel 2020, p. 452). In 1846, Feuerbach included an expanded version of his contribution in his *Complete Works* (Laska 2024, p. 5). Privately, he judged Stirner's book to be a "highly witty and ingenious work"; Stirner was "the most ingenious and freest writer I have ever known" (ibid.).

³⁹ Pagel 2020, p. 452.

⁴⁰ Korfmacher (2001, p. 64) includes Engels in the "fishpond" metaphor. In my opinion, Engels' reaction to Stirner in particular shows that Engels did not (yet) have this claim in 1844. Pagel (2020) describes in detail the "struggle for supremacy in determining consciousness," in which Marx and Engels expanded "their repertoire for disavowing competing approaches" in order to assert their own "hegemonic variant" (ibid., pp. 30, 39).

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 413–415; Marx/Engels 1975, p. 259.

⁴² See Krätke 2020, pp. 9–12.

⁴³ Engels was clearly much less involved than Marx (Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 749f.).

⁴⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, quoted in Pagel 2020, p. 492.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 472. This critique of Stirner's book was thus more extensive than the book itself.

⁴⁶ Laska 2024, pp. 83–92.

philosophical brotherhood,"⁴⁷ as "the most hollow and meagre skull among philosophers."⁴⁸ In their polemic, intended for imminent publication, they also provided information that made it easier to uncover Stirner's identity. They caricatured Stirner, who lived in the Berlin district of Neukölln, worked as a teacher and lived in precarious financial circumstances, as

"a localised Berlin schoolmaster or writer [...], whose activity is limited to hard work on the one hand and the enjoyment of thought on the other, whose world extends from Moabit to Köpenick and is boarded up behind the Hamburg Thor, whose relations with this world are reduced to a minimum by a miserable position in life".⁴⁹

It is difficult to imagine that they did not realise that they were putting Stirner in danger at a time when unpopular publications could lead to imprisonment. In any case, only those who feel deeply offended react so aggressively.⁵⁰

German Ideology

However, the planned publication of the debate with Stirner and – less in-depth and extensive – other thinkers fell through. Until the end of 1847, Marx and Engels made several unsuccessful attempts to publish these manuscripts,⁵¹ which underlines the importance they attached to their text.

It was not until the 1920s, in the Soviet Union, that an attempt was made to publish the collection in book form. The attempt to make it relatively close to the original, contrary to Stalin's ideas, cost David Ryazanov, who was responsible for it, "first his position as editor and finally his life": in 1931, he was removed from his post and, after many years of exile, shot in 1938 as a "right-wing Trotskyist".⁵² In a falsified, incomplete version, the collection of texts was published in 1932 as *Deutsche Ideologie* (*German Ideology*). In accordance with the specifications, a work with a "canonical character" had been constructed⁵³, the supposed "founding text of historical materialism",⁵⁴ which, according to the new editor, "illuminates its fundamental questions [...] in a multifaceted and exhaustive manner".⁵⁵

With an identical assessment, only even more mutilated, *The German Ideology* appeared in 1958 in volume 3 of the Marx-Engels-Werke⁵⁶. Both versions suggested that the text was

⁴⁷ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 237.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 506. However, it was not uncommon for Marx to disparage those who did not share his views. He could be "hurtfully, unbearably arrogant": "Anyone who was not for him was against him" (Schieder 2018, p. 170f.).

⁴⁹ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 319f. They refer to Stirner as a "schoolmaster" or "Berlin schoolmaster" several times in this work.

⁵⁰ The fact that Stirner also entered the field of "national economics" in 1845, which Marx now favoured (Pagel 2020, p. 429f.), may have intensified this concern.

⁵¹ Weckwerth 2018, p. 146.

⁵² Pagel 2020, p. 1, 8 and https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawid_Borissowitsch_Rjasanow.

⁵³ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 790.

⁵⁴ Pagel 2020, p. 1. Engels (1975a, p. 264), on the other hand, recapitulated self-critically in 1888 on the "old manuscript of 1845/46": "The section on Feuerbach is incomplete. The finished part consists of an exposition of the materialist conception of history, which only proves how incomplete our knowledge of economic history was at that time." He omitted Stirner's significance and never corrected this (Laska 2024, pp. 91–92).

⁵⁵ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 791. Although it could not be described as "exhaustive," it was the first time that "the enormous reductionism of subjective behavioural dimensions" was formulated "against Stirner," the first time that "any criticism of political power not based on the relations of production was rejected in a coherent form," and the first time that the historical-materialist model of an economically determined sequence of social forms was developed (Eßbach, 1982, p. 13). Pagel (2020, pp. 603–653) demonstrates that "in particular, the development" of the concepts of "ideology" and "petty bourgeoisie" in Marx and Engels can be traced back to "the debate with Stirner" (ibid., p. 19).

⁵⁶ Marx/Engels 1978. Accordingly, Kosing (1970, p. 1154) describes *The German Ideology* as a "coherent and comprehensive presentation of their new worldview".

primarily intended as a critique of Feuerbach, thus negating the immense significance that *The Ego and Its Own* had had.

This did not mean that Stirner was spared dogmatic Marxist criticism. This went so far as to accuse him of being "responsible for social democratic revisionism and thus for the powerlessness of the labour movement in the face of the First World War, for the failure of the November Revolution and for the failure of the labour movement in the face of fascism".⁵⁷ The original version of *The German Ideology*, in which the full force of the attack against Stirner can be felt on well over half of the pages,⁵⁸ has only been available to read since 2017.⁵⁹ In 1914, the "Austro-Marxist" Max Adler classified Stirner's social criticism as "the psychological counterpart to Marx's sociological criticism".⁶⁰ Stirner researcher Bernd Kast concludes: "While Marx and Engels and all socialists want to change material conditions, Stirner is concerned with changing the individual."⁶¹

Stirner vehemently opposed any kind of psychological (de)formation and ideological manipulation. But Marx and Engels, who had also previously campaigned against indoctrination, especially religious indoctrination, now countered: ideology and the psyche have no independence whatsoever, they are not worth closer examination, and therefore even this examination is bourgeois-reactionary!⁶²

Psychology distracts from class struggle – this became a motto of Marxism-Leninism, supplemented in the GDR by "From I to We!" Individuality, subjectivity, personal development, needs and sensitivities: there was no adequate engagement with anything that Stirner had focused on.

I suspect that Marx and Engels were already – unconsciously – disturbed by what Stirner suggested: an intense look at oneself, including inwardly.⁶³ Such a look can bring to light painful memories from one's life history, self-doubt and fears, and therefore evokes psychological resistance and defence mechanisms.⁶⁴

I don't know how things could have been different for Marx and Engels. Psychotherapy, which could have helped them work through their issues, did not yet exist. So these issues also had an impact on their teachings, limiting their truthfulness as "blind spots": we have to make an effort to look past what we don't want to see.

No definitive solutions

The old Engels would certainly have agreed that Marx's teachings should be *critically* revisited. In 1895, six months before his death, he recapitulated in a letter: "But Marx's whole

⁵⁷ This is how Eßbach (1982, p. 13) summarises the argumentation of Hans G. Helms (1966).

⁵⁸ The text on Stirner takes up approximately 450 pages in this edition (Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 16–123; 165–511), "is not only by far the most extensive of the manuscripts on *German Ideology*, it is also the manuscript that Marx and Engels completed first for printing in the planned quarterly journal in April 1846" (Pagel 2018, p. 134). Publishing this therefore seemed to them to be the most urgent task.

⁵⁹ On the history of the edition: Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 784–793; Pagel 2020, pp. 3–11, Weckwerth 2018.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Eßbach 1982, p. 25.

⁶¹ Stirner 2016, p. 373.

⁶² Eßbach (1982, pp. 72–79) suggests that Marx and Engels wanted to "outdo" Stirner in their criticism.

⁶³ Indeed, some of Stirner's ideas – e.g. about the internalisation of oppressive norms – seem "like an anticipation of Freud's psychoanalysis" (ibid., p. 70, see also Max Stirner Archive 2001). Engels does not seem to have contested these implications of Stirner's work, at least initially. However, by agreeing with Marx's blanket dismissal of Stirner, he too avoided the potentially unsettling confrontation with the psychological level of Stirner's book.

⁶⁴ Laska (2024, p. 89) judges: "Marx projects a number of his own weaknesses onto Stirner [...]: moralism, illusionism, a tendency towards (verbal) sleight of hand, bragging, egoism. Eßbach (1982, p. 87) diagnoses Marx and Engels with deep "unease" and a defence against fears arising from Stirner's questioning of internalised norms: they projected these fears "onto Stirner with charged sadistic imagination".

approach is not a doctrine, but a method. It does not provide ready-made dogmas, but points of reference for further investigation."⁶⁵ Five years earlier, he had said that the "conception of history" developed by him and Marx was "above all a guide to study".⁶⁶ As early as 1886, he described it as a "great fundamental idea" of materialist dialectics "that the world should not be understood as a complex of finished things, but as a complex of *processes* in which the seemingly stable things undergo no less than their mental images in our heads, the concepts, a continuous change of becoming and passing away." Therefore, "the demand for definitive solutions and eternal truths must cease once and for all; one must always be aware of the necessary limitations of all knowledge gained."⁶⁷

However, anyone who consistently applied this to the concept of Marxism quickly found themselves labelled a dissident in "real socialism" and ran the risk of being persecuted or – under Stalin – murdered.

Why should anything be further developed that Lenin had defined in 1913 as follows:

"Marx's doctrine is all-powerful because it is true. It is self-contained and harmonious; it gives people a unified world view."⁶⁸

So what supposedly hardly needed revision before 1990 was supposedly hardly worth considering after 1990. The slogan "Marx is dead" was widely accepted.⁶⁹ No wonder that an adequate assessment of the psyche never established itself in the mainstream of Marxism.⁷⁰

Neglected preliminary work

In 1893, ten years after Marx's death, Engels pointed out something that

"is not regularly emphasised enough in the writings of Marx and myself [...] . Namely, we have all initially placed the main emphasis on the *derivation* of political, legal and other ideological ideas and the actions mediated by these ideas from basic economic facts, and *we have had to do so*. In doing so, we have neglected the formal side over the substantive side: the way in which these ideas etc. come about."⁷¹

However, this was at most a half-hearted admission of our own limitations. The term "ideas" itself is a psychological one. The question of how these ideas come about is anything but "formal" – and qualified answers to this question could be found in the mid-19th century. Since the Renaissance, there had been increased scientific interest in the psyche. Names such as Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), John Locke (1632–1704) and Denis Diderot (1713–1784) stood for this.⁷²

⁶⁵ Marx/Engels 1968, p. 96.

⁶⁶ Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 436.

⁶⁷ Engels 1975a, p. 293.

⁶⁸ Lenin 1977, p. 3. However, Lenin did not treat Marxism as complete (Sandkühler 2021, p. 1494f.).

⁶⁹ From the end of 1989 onwards, this was also exploited for propaganda purposes in Norbert Blüm's version ("Marx is dead, Jesus lives!").

⁷⁰ Neither the increased interest in "Freudomarxism" in the "West" after 1968 or demands to take greater account of the "subjective factor" (e.g. Parin 1986) or critical theory, nor did the attempts to develop a Marxist theory of the subject in the "East" (e.g. Erpenbeck 1986; Borbely and Erpenbeck 1987). Such considerations certainly did not become part of state ideologies or the programmes of parties classifying themselves as "left-wing". On the connections between Marxism and psychoanalysis, see also Gente 1972.

⁷¹ Marx/Engels 1968, p. 96. In 1890, he had explained in another letter: "The fact that the younger generation sometimes attaches more importance to the economic side than it deserves is partly our own fault, Marx's and mine. We had to emphasise the main principle, which our opponents denied, and there was not always the time, place or opportunity to do justice to the other factors involved in the interaction" (Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 465).

⁷² Stubbe 2021, pp. 119–128.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Friedrich Fröbel (1772–1852) had drawn attention to childhood, education, schooling and thus to the anchoring of mental structures in life history.⁷³

This was explored in depth in literature by Karl Philip Moritz (1756–1793), among others, who founded the *magazine Zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde (On Empirical Psychology)* in 1783 and created the genre of the psychological development novel with Anton Reiser. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) also followed in his footsteps.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) anticipated many insights into mass psychology in his essay "What is Enlightenment?".⁷⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) advocated a view of human nature that was similar in parts to that of Sigmund Freud.⁷⁵ From the beginning of the 19th century, entrepreneur Robert Owen (1771–1858) not only proved that there were alternatives to predatory capitalism, he also linked this to thorough considerations on lifestyle, education, partnership and, ultimately, communist ideas.⁷⁶

Most of these men were known to Marx and Engels,⁷⁷ and they engaged more intensively with some of them – such as Kant,⁷⁸ Rousseau⁷⁹ and Owen.⁸⁰ Goethe's Faust tragedy, which, at least in its first part, tells a distinctly individual biography, was one of Marx's favourite books,⁸¹ from which he liked to quote, including in *Capital*.

Perhaps inspired by Rousseau, Marx wrote in his Feuerbach Theses in 1845: "The materialist doctrine of the change of circumstances and of education forgets that circumstances have to be changed by man and that the educator has himself to be educated."⁸² Years later, Engels emphasised from the "teachings of the materialist enlighteners" that "the character of man" is, on the one hand, the product of "innate organisation and, on the other hand, the circumstances surrounding man during his lifetime, but especially during his period of development".⁸³

However, neither he nor Marx seemed interested in what constitutes "innate organisation" or how characters develop during the "developmental period" of childhood and youth. They believed they held a key that opened every door anyway.

The Book of Human Powers

In 1844, Marx noted in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

"One can see how the history of *industry* and the *concrete* existence of industry that has come into being is the *open* book of *human powers*, of human *psychology* as it is sensually present [...]. A *psychology* for which this book, that is, the most sensually

⁷³ This also rendered obsolete the previously held notion that childhood was not a distinct phase of life and that children were merely "little adults" (cf. Böinig 2012).

⁷⁴ Kant 2004.

⁷⁵ Freud 1914, p. 53.

⁷⁶ Schultz 1948. Elsässer (1984, p. 237) attests that Owen and Fröbel "attribute great importance to the first years of life for later life [...]. Both educators have insights into the psyche of the child that were only confirmed by science a hundred years later".

⁷⁷ On Locke: Marx 2021, pp. 49f., 105, 116, 139, 165, 412, 645. On Diderot: *ibid.*, p. 148; Kaiser/Werchan 1967, pp. 52, 80. On Schopenhauer: Marx/Engels 1975, p. 361; Ebeling/Lütkehaus 1985, pp. 193–195. Heinrich (2021, pp. 266f.) writes that Marx "held Spinoza in as high esteem as Hegel". On the limits of Marx's knowledge of philosophy: Anderson 2023, pp. 68f.

⁷⁸ Heinrich 2021, p. 195.

⁷⁹ Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 253, 459, 583, 584, 649; Kaiser/Werchan 1967, p. 175.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Engels 1973, pp. 197–200.

⁸¹ Heinrich 2018, p. 13.

⁸² Marx 1969, p. 5.

⁸³ Engels 1962a, p. 243.

present, most accessible part of history, has been closed, cannot become a real, meaningful and *genuine* science."⁸⁴

Undoubtedly, the mental state of those involved in the production process had an effect on it, just as this process had a reciprocal effect on those involved. It was therefore justified to demand that psychology be given due attention.

But Marx would have been aware in 1844 that archaeologists assumed an extended phase of human development in which there was no question of "industry".⁸⁵ From 1800 onwards, the idea of "a long period in human history" had become increasingly acceptable,⁸⁶ and by 1836 the division into the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages had become established. In this "pre-history", other "essential forces" may have manifested themselves. Human life has probably always encompassed more than production, at least relationships between men and women, adults and children, and relationships with nature that had nothing to do with work. Therefore, the book of human forces should be considered much thicker than Marx was willing to admit – and the relevance of "industry" correspondingly lower.

After all, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx considered human forces, psychology and the interactions between industry and the psyche worthy of even more explicit mention. That was about to change soon.

Character masks

Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, the first volume of which was published in 1867, is considered the central work of Marx and Engels' teachings.⁸⁷ Preliminary work on this is contained in the *Economic Manuscripts*. There, Marx postulated:

"In fact, the rule of the capitalists over the workers is only the rule of the independent [...] conditions of labour [...] over the workers themselves [...] The functions performed by the capitalist are only the functions of capital performed with consciousness and will [...]. The capitalist functions only as personified capital, capital as a person, just as the worker functions only as personified labour [...]. The rule of the capitalist over the worker is therefore the rule of the thing over the human being, of dead labour over living labour, of the product over the producer [...], the reversal of the subject into the object and vice versa."⁸⁸

Accordingly, the preface to *Capital* stated that the "figures of the capitalist and the landowner" outlined by Marx were

"only insofar as they are the personification of economic categories, the bearers of certain class relations and interests. Less than anyone else, my standpoint, which regards the development of economic social formations as a natural historical process,

⁸⁴ Marx 1968, p. 542.

⁸⁵ This was true even if Marx's later, unusually broad definition of industry had been used as a basis: in *Capital*, published in 1867, he spoke of "rural patriarchal industry of a peasant family" (Marx 2021, p. 92, cf. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrie>).

⁸⁶ Stabrey 2017, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Engels played an important role in the creation and – from the second edition onwards – the structure of the first volume, and even more so in the content and form of the volumes published after Marx's death (cf. Krätke 2020, pp. 24–44).

⁸⁸ Marx 2011, p. 64.

can hold the individual responsible for conditions of which he remains the social creature, however much he may subjectively rise above them."⁸⁹

Marx clearly did not consider the individual scope for rising above circumstances significant enough to explore. Instead, all three volumes of *Capital* vary on the thesis that people act according to predetermined patterns in the capitalist production process, like machines, without alternatives, helplessly subject to things and circumstances – wage workers just as much as capitalists.

Marx repeatedly stated that the capitalist is "capital personified, endowed with will and consciousness,"⁹⁰ that his "actions and omissions are merely functions" of capital,⁹¹ that his "soul" is the "soul of capital."⁹² Only "as capital" does "the automaton in the capitalist possess consciousness and will."⁹³ Under "penalty of ruin," competition forces him to "improve production,"⁹⁴ his "drive for enrichment" is

"effect of the social mechanism, in which it is only a cogwheel. Furthermore, the development of capitalist production makes a continuous increase in the capital invested in an industrial enterprise a necessity, and competition imposes the immanent laws of the capitalist mode of production on each individual capitalist as external laws of compulsion. It forces him to continually expand his capital in order to preserve it".⁹⁵

One of the tasks of the entrepreneur as "personified capital" is also to ensure "that the worker performs his work properly and with the appropriate degree of intensity".⁹⁶

The worker, in turn, is "although free, naturally dependent on the capitalist,"⁹⁷ firmly bound to capital,⁹⁸ belonging to it as "disposable human material"⁹⁹ even "before he sells himself to the capitalist."¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹ Forced to sell themselves voluntarily,¹⁰² workers are transformed into "accessories,"¹⁰³ into "automatic driving forces," mere machines "for the production of surplus value,"¹⁰⁴ into "instruments of production"¹⁰⁵ and "raw materials" of exploitation,¹⁰⁶ becoming "living[s] appendage" incorporated into a "dead mechanism".¹⁰⁷ The worker does not use the means of production, but *is* used by them and by the "working conditions".¹⁰⁸

⁸⁹ Marx 2021, p. 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 619.

⁹² Ibid., p. 247.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 425.

⁹⁴ Marx 1983a, p. 255.

⁹⁵ Marx 2021, p. 618.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 228.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 798, with the caveat that this applies to "old civilised countries."

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 675.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 662.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 603.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 381.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 793. A strange statement made by Marx on several occasions: Voluntariness is not compatible with coercion, not even "dialectically." This creates an emotional conflict in the people affected – which Marx ignores.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 508.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 421.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 445.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 596, 446. The latter assertions are also difficult to reconcile with one another: does the worker become an instrument of production, or is he used by the means of production? Do the means of production use one another, and if so, all of them?

Because people behave "merely atomistically", i.e. in isolation from one another, in the production process, the "form" of the production relations is independent "of their control and their conscious individual actions".¹⁰⁹ "Just as man is dominated in religion by the product of his own mind," so "in capitalist production he is dominated by the product of his own hands".¹¹⁰

To illustrate the relationship between capitalists and wage labourers, Marx uses the term "economic character masks" several times. These masks are also "personifications of economic conditions", with capitalist "slave owners" and proletarian "slaves", buyers and sellers of goods – including the "commodity labour" – facing each other as their bearers.¹¹¹ The term "character" therefore does not indicate that Marx wanted to deal with the psyche or claimed to include the actions of specific individuals. "The capitalist" acts in order not to go bankrupt, "the proletarian" in order not to starve – and neither can do otherwise. This made it unnecessary to consider further motives or deviating actions. Since Marx perceived people in capitalism as "cogwheels" and "accessories" of a machine, it seemed appropriate to him to describe their actions in a mechanistic way.

But could, can people really not do otherwise? Is the "subjective" scope so narrow that no significant influence can be exerted on socio-economic conditions?

Individual scope

For those who, in the second half of the 19th century, still mostly worked more than 10 hours a day for little money, there was indeed little energy and opportunity left to rise above their circumstances. For this reason alone, and because of the power imbalance, the responsibility of an individual proletarian for the capitalist economic system was minimal.

But throughout history, people have broken out of their circumstances. In 73 BCE, for example, the slaves who liberated themselves in the Spartacus uprising did so – an example that Marx was familiar with.¹¹² Since then, countless people have committed themselves to other people, to a wide variety of goals and ideas, even when they knew that they were putting their physical integrity or their very existence at risk. During the lifetimes of Marx and Engels, this was already happening in the struggle for liberation from capitalist oppression, as in the Paris Commune uprising of 1871. During its suppression, up to 35,000 people were massacred and thousands more were later deported.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 649.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 100. A recent article on this subject states: "The question [...] of what scope social roles ('masks') open up for those who act within them [...] is answered differently in Marxist-inspired social sciences. Marx tended to believe that it was only possible to rise above capitalist conditions to a very limited extent [...]". (Demirović n.d.). Hans Hiebel (2019, p. 41) confirms: "The individual behind the mask or role appears irrelevant." Wikipedia offers an astonishing thesis on "character masks." In a manner reminiscent of pathological personality splitting, people would switch between their "mask" and their "true self" – a term that does not appear in Marx's context of "character masks" – in the blink of an eye. And they do so twice a day: "People in capitalism" must act as *capitalists* or *proletarians* in the "production process [...] and thus fulfil an objectively necessary function that has nothing to do with their otherwise 'true' selves. In their everyday working lives, they slip into the masks of capitalists and workers, but after work, people can drop these masks." Following this thesis, Marx's answer to the "fundamental question of philosophy" would have to be supplemented: "It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness – but only between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m." Marx did not comment on what the "production self" takes home with it.

¹¹² [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spartacus_\(The_German_Ideology\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spartacus_(The_German_Ideology)). After reading a novel about Spartacus, Marx wrote that he appeared to be "the most famous fellow in the whole of ancient history. A great general [...], a noble character, a true representative of the ancient proletariat" (Marx/Engels 1974, p. 160).

¹¹³ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pariser_Kommune

In the same year, Marx commemorated the "self-sacrificing pioneers of a new and better society" in his work *The Civil War in France*.¹¹⁴ Had these pioneers not cast off their "character masks"?

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels mentioned "bourgeois ideologists who have worked their way up to a theoretical understanding of the whole historical movement":¹¹⁵ presumably a self-portrayal. Did they thereby claim the exception of being able to take off their masks? Or did Marx believe that, since he was neither a proletarian nor an entrepreneur, this question did not apply to him? And how did he see it with Engels?

Successful capitalist, leading socialist

Engels' father, a respected textile entrepreneur, demanded that Friedrich follow in his footsteps, forbade him from completing his secondary education and forced him into a commercial apprenticeship. The son tried to make the best of it in his own way. In August 1840, he reported to his sister Marie about a "significant improvement" in his office. Since it had always been "very boring" to "rush to the desk right after lunch when you're so terribly lazy," "to remedy this evil," two "very nice hammocks" had been set up in the attic, in which we [...] sometimes took a little nap. [...] I stole away from the office, took cigars and matches with me, ordered beer; [...] and lay down in the hammock and rocked myself very gently."¹¹⁶ From 1839 onwards, when he was 19 years old, he expressed his rapidly growing aversion to the political and economic system¹¹⁷ in newspaper articles published under the pseudonym Friedrich Oswald.

In 1841, Engels succeeded in escaping his father's direct influence. He developed an intense interest in philosophy, politics and – even before Marx – economics. In 1844, he got to know Marx better. The book *Die heilige Familie*,¹¹⁸ which he wrote together with Marx in 1845, also bore Engels' name. Soon afterwards, he fought against the existing order with words and deeds, and in 1849 also with a sword in his hand in the "Palatinate Uprising".¹¹⁹ He was wanted by the authorities and had to flee, changing countries several times.

At the age of thirty, Engels returned to the company, became an authorised signatory, then a partner in his father's Manchester business, not least in order to support Marx financially. This was particularly necessary because Marx was not good with money but attached importance to "the outward appearance of bourgeois respectability" – and put earning money for his scientific interests on the back burner.¹²⁰ Without Engels' help, without benefiting from his profits, Marx's work would not have existed.

In 1867, shortly before Marx published *Capital*, Engels revealed to him: "I long for nothing more than deliverance from this dogged commerce, which completely demoralises me with its waste of time. As long as I am in it, I am incapable of anything [...]."¹²¹ The latter statement was inaccurate: Engels never allowed himself to be permanently dissuaded from political engagement. As Thomas Kuczynski reports, he

¹¹⁴ Marx 1962b, p. 357. The term "character mask" or any discussion of it does not appear in this work.

¹¹⁵ Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 472.

¹¹⁶ Marx/Engels, 1975, p. 192f.

¹¹⁷ Hunt 2021, pp. 42–57.

¹¹⁸ Marx/Engels 1962.

¹¹⁹ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pfalzischer_Aufstand

¹²⁰ Hunt 2021, p. 258f. Similarly presented in Neffe 2017, p. 367–370, 382–386.

¹²¹ Marx/Engels 1965, p. 293.

"led a double life for over 20 years, on the one hand as a bachelor in the 'shit trade' with a suitable flat, and on the other as the partner of Mary Burns, an Irish proletarian who, since their first encounter in 1843/44, had familiarised him with the slums of Manchester and the Irish way of life. The two lived together in flats that he rented under various names and where he was also able to pursue his studies and write articles at night."¹²²

As soon as possible, the now 49-year-old Engels quit his hated job and became a wealthy rentier,¹²³ who continued to provide for Marx's family. In 1870, he moved to London with his new partner Lizzy Burns – whose sister had died in 1863 – and "threw himself back into work," including in the "General Council of the International Workingmen's Association" and as a publicist for the socialist press.¹²⁴

In 1883, he wrote in a letter that it was possible to

"perfectly well be a stockbroker and a socialist at the same time, and therefore hate and despise the *class* of stockbrokers. Will it ever occur to me to apologise for having once been an associate [partner] in a factory? Anyone who wanted to reproach me for that would have a hard time. And if I were sure that I could make a million on the stock exchange tomorrow and thus provide the party [...] with substantial funds, I would go to the stock exchange immediately."¹²⁵

After Marx's death, Engels became a "one-man correspondence office" and "the de facto leader of the European socialist movement";¹²⁶ until the end of his life, he was involved in various publications and political activities.

But did Engels, at least as a partner in his father's company, function as an "economic character mask"? Only to a limited extent.

Engels took care of the business with unexpected zeal, sometimes finding himself forced to dismiss employees, for example for "immorality." But in his company, the proletarians found "better working conditions" than elsewhere. In "few factories," Engels biographer Tristram Hunt quotes, "the workers were so profitably and regularly employed."¹²⁷

He used a large part of his surplus to enjoy life and, until his death, to "regularly send more than half of his annual income to the Marx family." In today's terms, that amounted to a total of up to £400,000 in the 19 years he worked for the company alone.¹²⁸

Engels was not only personally committed to the fight against capitalism, he also financed Marx's anti-capitalist work and continuously provided him with indispensable insider information from the world of work.¹²⁹

In order to spare his mother stressful inheritance disputes, Engels renounced his shares in the German branch of his father's company in 1860 in what was for him a "highly unfavourable arrangement".¹³⁰ He also agreed to an unfavourable agreement in order to be able

¹²² Kuczynski 2020.

¹²³ Hunt (2021, p. 16) also describes Engels as a "man who took part in fox hunts, [...] a womaniser and champagne-sipping capitalist". Perhaps Marx (1963, p. 470) had Engels in mind when he emphasised that he did not regard the capitalist "as a capitalist consumer and bon vivant".

¹²⁴ Kuczynski 2020.

¹²⁵ Marx/Engels 1967a, p. 444.

¹²⁶ Krätke 2020, p. 23.

¹²⁷ Hunt 2021, p. 256.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 268f.

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 284f.

to withdraw completely from the company in 1869. Marx's daughter Eleanor reports: "I will never forget the triumphant 'for the last time' he exclaimed" when he went to the shop on the day of his departure. Hours later, he returned from there, waving "his cane in the air and singing and laughing with his whole face. Then we feasted and drank champagne and were happy."¹³¹

I could not find out whether Engels, despite his constant gifts to Marx, was able to "continually expand his capital in order to preserve it" – which, according to Marx, he would have been forced to do. I doubt that capital expansion was a priority for Engels.

In any case, it seems grotesque to me to label Engels as "personified" capital and to try to capture the essence of his personality with the term "capital soul". His activities as a revolutionary, socialist publicist and politician, as sponsor, editor and executor of Marx's work, as founder of "Marxism" were incomparably more effective than his involvement in "dogged commerce": he was a capitalist who weakened capitalism far more than he strengthened it. His rising above circumstances was more characteristic of him than his actions in his "character mask".

Marx and Engels also had quite precise knowledge of a capitalist who *completely* discarded this mask.

Entrepreneur, philanthropist and communist

Born in 1771, Robert Owen was a prime example of what Engels meant when he said that "the human heart [...] is unselfish and sacrificial in its egoism".¹³² Coming from an indebted family of craftsmen, Owen developed early on into a "self-made man".¹³³ At the age of 28, he took over the management of a cotton mill in New Lanark, Scotland, which soon employed over 2,000 people, many of whom "had ceased to be human beings through drunkenness and sexual debauchery, through theft and laziness, through brutality and ignorance".¹³⁴ Owen said he had two options for dealing with them. One would have been to "constantly reprimand" them, to "prosecute many of them as thieves, to imprison them, to expel them, even to have them sentenced to death, for at that time theft, to the extent that I discovered it, was punishable by death. This was the practice of society up to that time". Or, he continued, he could regard them as what they were: "creatures of foolish and harmful circumstances, for which society alone was responsible."¹³⁵

In order to eliminate the "sources of evil", he reduced the working hours, which at that time were up to 16 hours, to 10.5 hours, banned night work, and ordered 30 minutes for breakfast and 60 minutes for lunch. The factory rooms were made "bright and airy", living conditions were improved, gardens were laid out, a library, a lecture hall and a dance hall were built, insurance was introduced "for sick and elderly workers", and various occupational safety measures were implemented that would not become standard practice in Great Britain until 50 years later. To reduce the workers' debt, Owen had a shop set up that sold goods "without profit".¹³⁶ After continuing to pay full wages for four months in 1806, even though the factory was at a standstill due to a shortage of raw materials, he finally had the employees on his side.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 319f.

¹³² Marx/Engels 1975, p. 252.

¹³³ Zahn 1989, p. 18f.

¹³⁴ Quoted from an article about Owen in Schultz 1948, p. 14.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Simon 1925, p. 37.

¹³⁶ All information and quotations in Schultz 1948, pp. 14–16.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15, also Engels 1962a, p. 244.

Owen paid particular attention to children. Whereas five-year-olds had previously been used for production in New Lanark, he raised the age limit to 10. He contacted renowned educators such as Heinrich Pestalozzi and set up a predominantly free school for children aged five and above in "large, airy and well-tempered rooms", which included "writing, arithmetic, reading, natural history, geography and modern history", "gymnastics, dancing and music". His aim was to "build character" and "encourage independent thinking".¹³⁸ The teachers he selected "were to be friends and companions to their pupils," refraining from threats, punishments, and even corporal punishment, as well as praise: "It was not severity but kindness that guided the pupils, principles that Owen also followed in the upbringing of his own seven children."¹³⁹

In order to run New Lanark according to "philanthropic" standards, he founded a society in 1813 whose entire net profit was to be "used for the education of the children and the general welfare of the workers after deduction of interest on capital."¹⁴⁰

Both Engels and Marx referred to Owen several times since 1843.¹⁴¹ Engels acknowledged that his fellow manufacturer had transformed a population "composed largely of demoralised elements [...] into a model colony": "Simply by placing people in more humane circumstances and, in particular, by carefully educating the younger generation."¹⁴²

There was therefore no question of unconditional profit maximisation at the expense of the workers, as Marx considered absolutely necessary. Did this drive Owen to ruin, did he suffer the "punishment of ruin"?¹⁴³ No: his factory "produced fine yarn, and with great success. [...] Despite the large expenditures Owen made in the interests of his workers, New Lanark yielded a considerable net profit."¹⁴⁴ Markus Elsässer, who has researched the company's financial circumstances in more detail, attests to its unusually high profitability, which lasted for over 20 years until Owen's departure.¹⁴⁵

Was Owen opposed by the establishment because of his social commitment? Engels reports: "As long as he appeared as a mere philanthropist, he reaped nothing but wealth, applause, honour and fame. He was the most popular man in Europe. Not only his peers,¹⁴⁶ but also statesmen and princes listened to him with approval."¹⁴⁷ Owen biographer Helene Simon adds: "For twenty years, New Lanark was the delight of thousands of visitors. Among them were kings and envoys of kings, high ecclesiastical dignitaries, city deputies, parliamentarians and scholars."¹⁴⁸

But despite all this, according to Engels, "Owen was not satisfied. The existence he had created for his workers was, in his eyes, [...] still far from allowing for a comprehensive and rational development of character and intellect, let alone a free life." Since the working class created social wealth, it was entitled to "also belong to it. The new, powerful productive forces [...] provided Owen with the basis for a new social order and were destined, as the common property of all, to work only for the common welfare of all."¹⁴⁹

¹³⁸ Schultz 1948, pp. 16–18.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 18. For details on "Robert Owen as an educator": Elsässer 1984, pp. 216–238.

¹⁴⁰ Simon 1925, p. 63.

¹⁴¹ See <https://aaap.be/Pages/Transition-de-Robert-Owen.html>.

¹⁴² Engels 1962a, p. 244.

¹⁴³ Marx 1983a, p. 255.

¹⁴⁴ Schultz 1948, p. 20.

¹⁴⁵ Elsässer 1984, pp. 63–67.

¹⁴⁶ Simon (1925, p. 61f.) also describes resistance from Owen's shareholders.

¹⁴⁷ Engels 1962a, p. 245.

¹⁴⁸ Simon 1925, p. 66.

¹⁴⁹ Engels 1962a, p. 245.

Since Owen now argued with communist theses, attacking private property, religion and the then form of marriage, he reaped different reactions. Engels writes: "He knew what lay ahead of him if he attacked them: general ostracism by official society, the loss of his entire social position. But he did not allow himself to be deterred from attacking them ruthlessly, and what he had foreseen came to pass." When Engels then goes on to say that Owen was henceforth "banished" from "official society, ignored by the press, impoverished by failed communist experiments in America, in which he sacrificed his entire fortune,"¹⁵⁰ he paints a false picture.¹⁵¹

Owen withdrew from the active management of New Lanark in 1824 and bought the 20,000-acre settlement of New Harmony in Indiana, USA. Here, for three years, he gathered what he initially considered to be positive and, overall, very valuable experience in his attempt to develop a self-governing community. This project included, among other things, a free comprehensive school for children aged three to 16 and the equality of women, including the right to vote. Despite its ultimate failure, New Harmony became "the birthplace of the women's movement, American socialism and cooperatives".¹⁵²

Owen lost four-fifths of his "considerable private fortune" in the United States,¹⁵³ but his optimism remained unbroken. Between 1826 and 1837, he is said to have "given 100 public speeches, [...] written 2,000 newspaper articles and made 300 journeys".¹⁵⁴

In 1832, he launched a new experiment in England: a bank for the direct exchange of labour and products, as a first step towards an "even more radical transformation of society".¹⁵⁵ After initially attracting intense interest from numerous customers, this experiment also proved unsustainable in 1834. Owen lost part of his property again, "transferred the rest to his children and kept only enough for himself to live a modest life".¹⁵⁶

After a communally managed settlement community also proved impossible to realise, Owen shifted his focus even more towards public relations work. In 1835, at the age of 64, he founded the "Association of All Classes of All Nations", which he wanted to shape into a "school of humanity for social democracy". The movement this sparked is said to have had up to 100,000 "declared supporters" and to have contributed "greatly to the spread of socialism in England". On trips to promote this idea, Owen was once again "received by kings, ministers and envoys" in 1837, but this time he received no support.¹⁵⁷

It was only in his final years that he withdrew more, but he gave up neither his hopes nor his publishing activities. A "far from complete list" of his publications contains 129 titles, which appeared in up to nine editions, as well as 11 periodicals edited by him.¹⁵⁸

In 1858, Owen died at the age of 87 in his birthplace of Newtown. He had "rejected spiritual comfort with decisive dignity" and, when asked provocatively by the pastor whether he "did not regret having wasted his life on fruitless efforts," he is said to have replied: "My life was not useless. I brought important truths to the world. And if it did not heed them, it was because it did not understand them. I am ahead of my time."¹⁵⁹

Owen, who embodied "the unity of theory and practice",¹⁶⁰ consistently fulfilled Marx's

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ 80 million square metres (Elsässer 1984, p. 90).

¹⁵² Simon 1925, p. 199.

¹⁵³ Elsässer 1984, p. 91.

¹⁵⁴ Schultz 1949, p. 56.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 61f.

¹⁵⁸ Zahn 1989, p. 18.

¹⁵⁹ Schultz 1948, p. 65.

¹⁶⁰ Zahn 1989, p. 59.

claim not only to interpret the world philosophically, but to change it meaningfully¹⁶¹ before Marx did.

Engels also recognised that Owen had a lasting impact:

"All social movements, all real progress that has been achieved in England in the interests of the workers, is linked to the name of Owen. In 1819, after five years of effort, he pushed through the first law restricting women's and children's work in factories. He presided over the first congress at which the trade unions of the whole of England united to form a single large trade union federation. As transitional measures towards the complete communist organisation of society, he introduced, on the one hand, cooperative societies [...] and, on the other hand, labour exchanges, institutions for the exchange of products of labour [...]."¹⁶²

Marx recapitulated in *Capital*:

"When Robert Owen, shortly after the first decade of this century, not only advocated the necessity of limiting the working day in theory, but actually introduced the ten-hour day in his factory at New Lanark, it was ridiculed as a communist utopia, just like his 'combination of productive labour with the education of children', just like the workers' cooperative businesses he set up. Today, the first utopia is factory law, the second appears as an official phrase in all 'Factory Acts',¹⁶³ and the third even serves as a cover for reactionary swindles."¹⁶⁴

So let us note: acting in the 'character mask' was, as Marx knew, by no means inevitable. Capitalists, as Engels and Owen showed, could not only act differently within certain limits imposed on them by competition. Like Owen, they could even decide against remaining capitalists. They were not threatened with death, but above all with no longer being so rich, and perhaps even with becoming wage labourers. While the oppressed could only escape their circumstances at great risk, this was not the case for entrepreneurs. Since the latter had more money, time, and usually better health and education, the influence of their interests, views, goals, personality structures, and activities was also much stronger.

In any case, no one is born a capitalist, and no one has to become one. There are therefore always personal motives for becoming, being or remaining a capitalist.¹⁶⁵ This, of course, refers to something that did not fit into Marx's thinking: individual personality structures.¹⁶⁶ Since alternative behaviour is possible, there is also significant subjective leeway – and thus something that Marx largely denied entrepreneurs: personal responsibility. While he accused capitalists of the worst crimes in an unjustified sweeping generalisation, he also granted them equally unrealistic incapacity: as instruments of "capital". But capitalists are generally of legal age and therefore morally and legally responsible for their actions, including their crimes. Marx's argument is not suitable as a justification for "mitigating circumstances".

¹⁶¹ "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx/Engels 1978, p. 7).

¹⁶² Engels 1962a, p. 245f.

¹⁶³ Laws passed by the British Parliament to regulate industrial labour.

¹⁶⁴ Marx 2021, p. 317, footnote 191.

¹⁶⁵ A passage in the first volume of *Capital* (ibid., p. 591) suggests that Marx took a similar view: "The economic character mask of the capitalist is attached to a person only insofar as his money constantly functions as capital."

¹⁶⁶ Simon (1925) describes these structures in relation to Owen, particularly on pp. 13–52, while references to them in relation to Engels can be found throughout Hunt's biography (2021). Elsässer (1984, pp. 46–88) has provided a detailed account of the economic conditions that contributed to Owen's success and his specific business practices.

But wasn't it understandable that someone would want to live a comfortable life with material security as a capitalist? Counter-question: what price had to be paid for this?

The condition of the working class

After spending 21 months in Great Britain researching industrial development and its consequences, Engels published his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845. It contains harrowing accounts of the living conditions of the English proletariat. Engels writes of the dwellings in the London district of St. Giles, saying that

"the filth and dilapidation exceed all imagination – there is hardly a window pane intact, the walls are crumbling, the doorposts and window frames are broken and loose, the doors are nailed together from old boards or do not exist at all – here in this thieves' quarter, doors are not even necessary because there is nothing to steal. Piles of dirt and ashes lie everywhere, and the dirty liquids poured out in front of the doors collect in stinking puddles. This is where the poorest of the poor live, the lowest-paid workers [...]"¹⁶⁷

Engels quotes the following about Bethnal Green, another district: "Not *one* family man in ten in the whole neighbourhood has any clothes other than his work clothes, and those are as poor and ragged as possible; indeed, many have no other blanket at night than these rags, and nothing to sleep on but a sack of straw and shavings."¹⁶⁸

Engels read in the newspaper how the body of 45-year-old Ann Galway had been found in November 1843: she had

"lived with her husband and 19-year-old son in a small room in which there was neither bedstead nor bedding nor any other furniture. She lay dead next to her son on a pile of feathers scattered over her almost naked body, for there was neither blanket nor bed sheet. The feathers stuck so firmly to her entire body that the doctor could not examine the body before it had been cleaned, and then he found her completely emaciated and covered with bites from vermin. Part of the floor in the room had been torn open, and the hole was used by the family as a toilet."¹⁶⁹

Even this misery could be exacerbated. For in "London, fifty thousand people get up every morning without knowing where they will lay their heads the following night". Added to this were hunger and disease: "During my stay in England, at least twenty to thirty people died directly of starvation in the most appalling circumstances," and many more indirectly, "as the continuing lack of adequate food caused fatal diseases and thus carried off its victims [...]"¹⁷⁰

Passages from *Capital* complete this picture. Marx goes on to say that in Manchester, "the average life expectancy of the wealthy class is 38, that of the working class only 17 years [...].

¹⁶⁷ Engels 1962c, p. 260.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 262.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 258.

In Liverpool, it is 35 years for the former and 15 for the latter."¹⁷¹ He commented on child labour "in the glassworks" with the words:

"Apart from the exertion of lifting and carrying, such a child marches in the huts that make bottles and flint glass [...] 15 to 20 (English) miles in 6 hours! And the work often lasts 14 to 15 hours! [...] Mr White gives examples of a boy working 36 hours straight; others where 12-year-old boys work until 2 a.m. and then sleep in the hut until 5 a.m. (3 hours!) to start the day's work all over again!"¹⁷²

And he cites a report on the fate of "many thousands of these helpless little creatures" who had previously been snatched from their parents:

"Overseers were appointed to supervise their work. It was in the interest of these slave drivers to work the children to the utmost [...]. They were driven to death by excessive work ... they were whipped, chained and tortured with the most exquisite refinement of cruelty; in many cases they were starved to the bone while the whip kept them working ... Yes, in some cases they were driven to suicide! ... The beautiful and romantic valleys of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lancashire, hidden from public view, became gruesome wastelands of torture and – often murder! ... The profits of the manufacturers were enormous."¹⁷³

So what was usually the basis for being a successful capitalist and prevailing over the competition, according to Marx?¹⁷⁴ Contempt for humanity, a willingness to be cruel, to humiliate, harm, maim and kill individuals of all ages on a massive scale, and thus: massive personal guilt. Did Marx seriously believe that a "natural historical process" made this inevitable – and thereby also erased this guilt?

The example of Robert Owen shows that there were people who were not prepared to become guilty in this way. (And whoever is reading this right now can ask themselves whether they would be prepared to do so.) Owen also proved that economic efficiency and humane treatment of workers could be reconciled without going bankrupt or falling victim to social ostracism. If most capitalists did not follow this path, or probably did not even consider it, then this could certainly not be explained by economic necessity.¹⁷⁵ Then what?

I mean: with the typical psychological damage caused by authoritarian upbringing and socialisation. Oppressed children develop justified anger and understandable hatred towards their oppressive educators. Since these feelings cannot be expressed, they build up and become destructive. When, as adults, they are offered opportunities to vent these pent-up feelings on weaker individuals, preferably in a socially acceptable manner, for example as police

¹⁷¹ Marx 2021, p. 671.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 279.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 786. Simon (1925, pp. 9–12) also describes the "large-scale murder of children" (ibid., p. 9, footnote 2).

¹⁷⁴ The living and working conditions of large sections of the European proletariat improved significantly in the 20th century. However, this did not mean the end of exploitation and oppression, and it came at the expense of the environment, future generations and the "Third World". Today, children are mainly exploited for profit in the "global South": according to current estimates, 160 million girls and boys are affected by child labour and "have to work under conditions that deprive them of their basic rights and opportunities" (<https://www.unicef.de/informieren/aktuelles/blog/-/kinderarbeit-fragen-und-antworten/275272>).

¹⁷⁵ Even luxury purchases such as a third sailing yacht cannot be classified as an expression of economic constraints or as measures to increase profits. Where so much material surplus is available, it could always be used for the benefit of the exploited without being exposed to the "punishment of ruin". If capitalists prefer to squander this money, this cannot be explained economically or by the teachings of Marx and Engels – but possibly by the unconscious urge to compensate for ingrained inferiority complexes.

officers, soldiers, successful politicians or entrepreneurs, they often find it difficult to resist this temptation.

In this understanding, capitalism – like any oppressive order – is an expression of mass psychic disorders brought about by socialisation. Exacerbated by social crises, these disorders can escalate into violent excesses such as fascism.¹⁷⁶

Marx and Engels did not have access to these insights, which were only later elaborated in detail by Wilhelm Reich.¹⁷⁷ But they too were confronted with the question of what motivates people.

Empty heads

In 1843/44, Marx had noted: "To be radical is to grasp things at their root. But for humans, the root is the human being itself."¹⁷⁸ As early as 1845, in the manuscripts for *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels reduced what was important about "real individuals" and their living conditions to "the physical [!] organisation of these individuals & their relationship to the rest of nature," "the physical constitution of human beings, [...] the geological, oro-hydrographical,¹⁷⁹ climatic & other conditions".¹⁸⁰ One could "distinguish human beings from animals by consciousness, by religion, by whatever else one wants."¹⁸¹ Consciousness is here degraded to one distinguishing feature among many, placed on the same level as religion, which Marx and Engels fought against as irrational. In truth, humans "began to differ from animals as soon as they began to *produce* their food, a step that was conditioned by their physical organisation".¹⁸²

What "people say, imagine, picture" are, on the other hand, "fog formations in the brain [...], necessary sublimations of their material, empirically verifiable life process linked to material conditions". Morality, religion, ideology and the corresponding "forms of consciousness" possess neither "independence" nor "history" nor "development".¹⁸³ "For me [...] the ideal is nothing other than the material translated and implemented in the human mind," Marx then informed his readers in the second edition of *Capital*.¹⁸⁴ For him, this human mind was apparently – apart from animal instincts – initially empty, in any case carrying nothing spiritual, psychological or "ideal" within it. He seemed to assume that we are born without any inner criteria for what we need on a psychosocial level and what harms us, without any need for emotional and physical closeness, for communication, without intellect, curiosity, creativity,

¹⁷⁶ In 2017, I put it this way: "Authoritarian, emotion-suppressing socialisation is [...] not a sufficient condition for fascist degeneration, but it is a *necessary prerequisite*. We are therefore dealing here with what is probably the most important condition for the emergence of fascist, destructive social systems. If we could ensure that this type of socialisation no longer took place, these systems would also cease to exist. Mentally healthy people do not want or tolerate oppression, especially when it is exercised as brutally as in fascism. There can be no destructive social system without people who have been made destructive!" (Peglau 2017b, p. 110).

¹⁷⁷ See Reich 2020; Peglau 2019b, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Marx 1976a, p. 385.

¹⁷⁹ Concerning the course of mountains and waters.

¹⁸⁰ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 8. They thus defined the important external conditions quite broadly, almost ecologically. From 1873 onwards, Engels (1962b) returned to this idea more strongly (cf. Krätke 2020, pp. 35–39).

¹⁸¹ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 8.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁸⁴ Marx 2021, p. 27. However, human minds are themselves material, so that material influences act *both* outside *and* inside the individual. And what was meant by "the ideal": spirit, psyche, character, personality, thoughts, feelings? Brodbeck (2018, p. 10) classifies Marx's quoted sentence as "crude materialism" and asks: "What 'material' is 'translated' here into language, and ultimately into 'ideas' [...]?" According to Marx, matter has 'properties', and it is precisely these 'properties of things' [...] that are supposed to 'imprint' themselves on the brain. So are properties themselves 'matter'?"

without the prerequisites for self-organisation:¹⁸⁵ blank sheets of paper on which "the material", especially the relations of production, somehow write the text.

If this were true, infants would be antisocial, robotic beings who perceived their mothers exclusively as providers of physical needs.¹⁸⁶ We would thus come into the world more pitiful than plants, whose internal structure and development plan not only enables them to flourish under favourable circumstances, but also to actively seek what they need to live: light, water, nutrients, appropriate proximity or distance to conspecifics.¹⁸⁷

But if humans were so emotionally and mentally empty, unmotivated and aimless, where would the drive for their development come from, according to the theory of Marx and Engels?

In short: from "outside".

Human-creating work

Although they hardly dealt with individual life stories, Marx and Engels did comment on the background of the origin and development of humanity.

In 1845, they interpreted the act of procreation as "the production of life" and claimed that "the division of labour [...] was originally nothing more than the division of labour in the sexual act".¹⁸⁸ Sexual intercourse as work – wherever the two young men looked, they saw one thing above all else: economics. In *Capital*, Marx wrote:

"The use and creation of tools, although already present in embryonic form in certain animal species, characterise the specifically human labour process, and [Benjamin] Franklin therefore defines man as 'a toolmaking animal'".¹⁸⁹

In 1876, Engels developed a related idea in a fragment published posthumously as *part of The Descent of Man*.¹⁹⁰ By "work," he meant the activity that began "with the manufacture of tools," more specifically tools "for hunting and fishing, the former also serving as weapons." This work was the

"first fundamental condition of all human life, to such an extent that we must say, in a certain sense, that it created man himself. [...] Work first, and then language¹⁹¹ – these

¹⁸⁵ In self-organisation, a system is shaped by its own internal drive. Ancient philosophers already pondered this idea, and in the 18th and 19th centuries, Kant and Schelling explored it in greater depth (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selbstorganisation>, cf. Sandkühler 2021, pp. 2428–2433).

¹⁸⁶ Dornes 2018, for example, demonstrates how false this assumption would be. Even though childhood had not yet been intensively researched in 1844, Marx was able to test his views – based on his own childhood and his daughter, who was born in 1844.

¹⁸⁷ See Wohlleben 2015.

¹⁸⁸ Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 28, 31. Engels (1975b, p. 68) would later expand the concept of class in a similarly generous manner, claiming that men and women had been opposed to each other as "classes" since the introduction of monogamy.

¹⁸⁹ Marx 2021, p. 194.

¹⁹⁰ Engels 1962b. He wrote that the entire collection of manuscripts still needed to be "heavily revised". In 1925, it was published in the USSR as *Dialectics of Nature*: a book "that Engels never wrote" (Krätke 2020, p. 35, see also Kangal 2022).

¹⁹¹ Engels (1962b, p. 447) also states that "the nascent humans came to the point where they *had something to say* to each other. The need created its own organ: the undeveloped larynx of the ape slowly but surely transformed." Although Engels identified a communicative need, i.e. something psychological, as the cause, he went on to claim that this development was solely due to work – as if humans had not always had many other reasons to communicate. Recent research suggests that the larynx only enabled spoken language around 250,000 years ago, more than two million years after the first documented use of tools – and that the mother-child relationship was of great importance for language development. It has also been proven that some animals have language skills and that great apes in particular can learn to communicate with humans using sign language without "work", only with training (Zimmer 2003, pp. 110–116, 176ff.).

are the two most essential drives under whose influence the brain of an ape gradually developed into the far larger and more perfect brain of a human being, despite all similarities."¹⁹²

Perhaps Engels wondered why, if "work" had such enormous power, it did not at least transform all primates into humans. In any case, he made the additional assumption that the starting point was a "monkey race" that was "far ahead of all others in intelligence and adaptability."¹⁹³ In doing so, however, he speculated about the *mental and spiritual* prerequisites for human development that already existed before "work" and without which "work" could not have brought about any change.

Contradicting the dominant role of "labour" was Engels' statement that when "these apes" began "to wean themselves from the aid of their hands in walking on level ground and to adopt a more and more upright gait [...], the decisive step was taken for the transition from ape to man"¹⁹⁴ – thus entirely without labour. Instead of "work first," he should have said: intelligence, adaptability and upright gait first!¹⁹⁵

Based on the knowledge of the time, Engels assumed that only "hundreds of thousands of years [...] had passed" before "a society of humans emerged from the pack of tree-climbing apes."¹⁹⁶ [According to current research, the development of humans \(and other modern primates\) began six to seven million years ago.](#) The earliest known fossil of the genus *Homo*, and thus the first sign of a human society, has been dated to 2.8 million years ago.¹⁹⁷ The oldest evidence of tool making that can be reliably attributed to the genus *Homo* dates back 2.6 million years.¹⁹⁸ This means that up to 4.4 million years of "humanisation" had taken place by then, for which there is, at least so far, no evidence of "work" in Engels' sense. The use of weapons for hunting has only been documented for the last 500,000 years.¹⁹⁹ Modern humans, *Homo sapiens*²⁰⁰ – a term introduced by Carl von Linné in 1758 – have apparently been fully developed for 200,000 to 300,000 years.

Engels also distinguished humans from animals in other ways. When the latter "exert a lasting influence on their environment", this happens unintentionally and is "something accidental for these animals themselves". Animals "merely use external nature" and bring about

"changes in it simply by their presence; humans make it serve their purposes through their changes, *dominate* it. And that is the ultimate, essential difference between humans and other animals, and it is again work that brings about this difference."²⁰¹

¹⁹² Engels 1962b, p. 447.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 449.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 444.

¹⁹⁵ Hunt (2021, p. 384) points out that Engels' prioritisation of work "contradicted Darwin's more cerebral idea" that the growth of the brain and intelligence preceded the learning of upright walking.

¹⁹⁶ Engels 1962b, p. 448.

¹⁹⁷ Villmoare et al. 2015.

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.archaeologie.bl.ch/entdecken/fundstelle/55/die-aeltesten-werkzeuge-der-menschheit/> There are now artefacts that are as old as 3.3 million years. Since they cannot be matched with fossils, it is unclear whether they belong to the Australopithecines or the genus *Homo* (Harmand et al. 2015).

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/mensch/fruehmenschen-jagten-schon-vor-500000-jahren-mit-stein-speerspitzen-a-867412.html> However, this only means that there is no evidence to date that tools were not used for hunting before this time.

²⁰⁰ Engels does not use this term in his fragment.

²⁰¹ Engels 1962b, p. 451f. Hunting weapons dating back 300,000 years are "undoubtedly authentic" (Kuckenbun 2022, p. 79).

Research has now shown that various animal species use tools in a planned manner,²⁰² thus changing nature not only through their "presence". Without showing any tendency towards humanisation, great apes also appear to manufacture some of their tools themselves²⁰³ – which means that the criterion of tool manufacture for differentiating between humans and animals is also likely to be obsolete. Quite apart from the question of why *the* planned use of existing materials as tools cannot also be classified as "work": why should anyone produce something that nature provides them with without any effort?²⁰⁴

If work had such an intense influence, it would have to do so permanently. Accordingly, Engels believed that the "further development" caused by work had continued "on a grand scale" after the completion of human evolution.²⁰⁵ However, to this day, "populations, e.g. in South America, Australia and Africa, have remained at a 'pre-modern level' in terms of their social constitution, including the level of development of their tools and means of communication [...]. The factor of labour has not been able to develop further here."²⁰⁶ In my opinion, this is not covered by Engels' qualification that "further development" was "interrupted in places [...] by local and temporal decline".²⁰⁷

Much of what Engels presented as factual statements were, in any case, assumptions.²⁰⁸ In 2020, anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow recapitulated that even today there are "hardly any finds" available for our prehistory:

"There are [...] thousands of years for which the only available evidence of hominid activity consists of a single tooth or perhaps a few flint flakes. [...] What did these early human societies look like? We should at least be honest at this point and admit that we have no idea. [...] For most periods, we don't even know what humans looked like below the larynx, let alone their pigmentation, diet and all the rest."²⁰⁹

The first "direct evidence of what we today [...] call 'culture' dates back no more than 100,000 years." It is only in the last 50,000 years that such evidence has gradually become more common.²¹⁰ And it is only in the last 5,000 years or so that more complex descriptions have been left to us in written languages.²¹¹ Even if we assume not seven but only six million

²⁰² https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werkzeuggebrauch_bei_Tieren#N%C3%BCssekacknacknack_mit_Hammer_und_Amboss. Engels also acknowledges that animals are capable of intentional behaviour, but not of intentional tool use.

²⁰³ The earliest finds to date are 4,300 years old (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primatenarch%C3%A4ologie>, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wissen/evolution-die-affen-archaeologen-1.164575>). If great apes were already making tools seven million years ago, it is possible that early humans also possessed this ability from the outset and did not have to "work" to acquire it.

²⁰⁴ Engels' view also suggests that as long as humans lived nomadically, for example, on what nature provided them in abundance, they were not yet human. For they only *consumed* – they did not *produce*. See, in contrast, Scott 2019, p. 22; Graeber/Wengrow 2021, pp. 473–476; Ryan/Jethá 2016, pp. 201–204, 236–239. Marx (1983b, p. 384) recognised in 1857/58 that that "migration" was "the first form of existence, not that the tribe settles in a particular place, but that it grazes on what it finds [!]" Later (Marx 1983a, p. 856), he stated that at the "beginning of society [...] there are no produced means of production yet".

²⁰⁵ Engels 1962b, p. 448.

²⁰⁶ Witzgall 2021, p. 7. Since hunter-gatherer societies in particular can also be understood as a successful model (Scott 2019; Ryan/Jethá 2016, pp. 177–244; Graeber/Wengrow 2022, pp. 473–476), maintaining a particular type of economy should not simply be dismissed as *an inability to develop* or stagnation – just as economic progress should not automatically be regarded as something good for humanity.

²⁰⁷ Engels 1962b, p. 448.

²⁰⁸ Or rather, the adoption of assumptions made by other authors. For lasting insights into Engels' fragment, see Kuckenburg 2022, pp. 138–159. Marx (2021, pp. 534f.) also presented assumptions about the "beginnings of culture" as proven facts.

²⁰⁹ Graeber/Wengrow 2022, p. 96, 98.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100f. The oldest known cave painting is currently 45,000 years old (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%B6hlenmalerei>).

²¹¹ Scott 2019, p. 20.

years since the beginning of human evolution, this means that for at least 5.9 million years, or approximately 98 per cent of that time, no verifiable statements can be made about social, political and economic issues.²¹²

As mentioned, Engels assumed a period of only hundreds of thousands of years. But even with this calculation, the vast majority of human history would remain in the dark. And in 1876, archaeology had far fewer finds to present than it does today.

What Engels apparently did was to project his and Marx's ideas about "labour" and the primacy of economics into the distant past – with arguments that were already quite dubious in his own time. To this end, he personified "labour" and endowed it with an almost magical power, which once again made a closer look at human motives and psychosocial circumstances – seemingly – unnecessary.

This approach was not specific to Engels.

What is „capital“?

Marx's three-volume work of the same name does not provide a definition of the subject referred to in the title, but rather a multitude of sometimes contradictory statements on the subject.²¹³

A small selection: Capital is what becomes of a value that is 'exploited' and turns into 'surplus value'.²¹⁴ "Every new capital enters the stage for the first time [...] still as money, [...] which is to be transformed into capital through certain processes."²¹⁵ "Capital is money, capital is commodity."²¹⁶ In the third volume of *Capital*, it then states:

"But capital is not a thing, but a specific social relation of production belonging to a specific historical social formation, which is represented by a thing. Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is the means of production transformed into capital, which in themselves are as little capital as gold and silver are money in themselves. It is the means of production monopolised by a certain section of society, which have become independent of living labour and the conditions under which this labour is performed."²¹⁷

According to Marx, capital is therefore simultaneously surplus value, money, commodities, products and means of production. But he believes that it is nevertheless "not a thing" – rather, it is a production relationship, and thus, in his understanding, an extremely comprehensive category that includes raw materials, means of production and human labour, as

²¹² Nevertheless, such statements are often made, mostly on the basis of questionable hypotheses, such as that humans lived 100,000 years ago in the same way as "primitive peoples" observed today.

²¹³ See Lotter/ Meiners/ Treptow 2016, pp. 170–178. It is understandable that theses can change in a decades-long research process such as that underlying the three volumes of *Capital*. But a serious approach would require that earlier theses no longer considered accurate be recognisably revised. I have not discovered where this should be the case with regard to Marx's descriptions of capital. I therefore consider it acceptable to refer here and elsewhere to all three volumes and sometimes to other writings that seem to me to be consistent with them. This is made more difficult by the fact that Marx often does not define terms that are important to him, nor does he even place them in clear hierarchies or relate them to one another. This, in addition to Marx's many contradictory statements, is likely to be one of the reasons why his texts are often interpreted like the Bible.

²¹⁴ Marx 2021, p. 165.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

²¹⁷ Marx 1983a, p. 822f.

well as the processes that take place between them and the existing "conditions of activity".²¹⁸

Marx illustrates this confusing diversity with a wide variety of examples, classifications, economic analyses, mathematical proofs and statistics. He describes how entrepreneurs acquire, increase, allocate²¹⁹ and convert capital,²²⁰ deals with "capital of 500 thalers"²²¹ as well as "capital costing 100,000 pounds[and] sterling,"²²² with advanced, interest-bearing, productive, variable, constant, fixed, dead, liquid, fictitious, circulating, social, functioning, personified, usurious, merchant, money, commodity, trade, commodity trading and money trading capital.²²³

His descriptions do not end there. He introduced an additional narrative level through which we get to know capital in a completely different way.

The animated monster

While capitalists and workers in *Capital* mostly appear as half-dead mannequins, they have a lively, powerful opponent there: "capital" itself. Marx endows this entity with a "life story"²²⁴ and a personality profile.

Capital comes into the world "from head to toe, from every pore, dripping with blood and filth",²²⁵ as "dead labour, which only comes to life like a vampire by sucking in living labour and lives all the more the more it sucks in".²²⁶ It "consumes labour power",²²⁷ begins to "work" [...], as if it had love in its body:²²⁸ a "self-exploiting value, an animated monster".²²⁹ In doing so, it becomes "aware of itself as a social power".²³⁰

Driven by "greed for exploitation and lust for power,"²³¹ it has "a single instinct for life, the instinct to exploit itself."²³² It not only has the ability to produce "surplus value"²³³ and "to conjure up money,"²³⁴ i.e. to generate it, but also to possess "spirit"²³⁵ and, at least in England, an "innermost secret of the soul."²³⁶ The "soul of capital"²³⁷ is capable of dreaming, for example, of workhouses being set up.²³⁸ Capital can speak, respond, agitate, formulate laws, "rant" about taxes, wage a "campaign", initiate a "revolt" and celebrate "orgies".²³⁹

Since the "development of productive forces" is its "historical task," capital "unconsciously creates the material conditions for a higher form of production,"²⁴⁰ throwing itself "with all

²¹⁸ See also the collection of Marx quotations in Lotter/Meiners/Treptow 2016, pp. 290–297.

²¹⁹ Marx 2021, p. 324.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 462.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 323.

²²² Ibid., p. 428.

²²³ See also index, ibid., p. 937.

²²⁴ "World trade and the world market opened up the modern history of capital in the 16th century" (ibid., p. 161).

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 788.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 247.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 209. "As if it had love in its body" is a quote from Goethe's "Faust", Part 1.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Marx 1983a, p. 205.

²³¹ Marx 2021, p. 668. Exploitation.

²³² Ibid., p. 247.

²³³ Ibid., p. 321.

²³⁴ Marx 1983a, p. 357.

²³⁵ Marx 2021, pp. 295, 520.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 627.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 247.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 293.

²³⁹ Ibid., pp. 275, 280, 304, 296, 447, 582, 300, 303, 294.

²⁴⁰ Marx 1983a, p. 269.

its might and full consciousness into the production of relative surplus value."²⁴¹ It "first subordinates labour to the technical conditions in which it finds it historically,"²⁴² takes "command,"²⁴³ "management, supervision, mediation" of production, and employs and remunerates the workers, driving them, "without being aware of it, to the most violent extension of the working day" and creating a "coercive relationship" that "compels the working class to perform more work".²⁴⁴

In doing so, capital is "ruthless towards the health and lifespan of workers, where it is not forced to show consideration by society", denies "the suffering" of the "working generation",²⁴⁵ demands and insists on "the pleasure of having eight-year-old workers toil incessantly from 2 a.m. to 8:30 p.m." and "starve them!"²⁴⁶

As an "exploiter of surplus labour and labour power, it surpasses all previous production systems based on direct forced labour in terms of energy, excessiveness and effectiveness".²⁴⁷

Not to forget that *characterisation* of capital in the truest sense of the word, which Marx quoted approvingly:

"'Capital,' says the Quarterly Reviewer, 'fears tumult and strife, and is of a timid nature. That is very true, but it is not the whole truth. Capital has a horror of the absence of profit, or of very small profit, as nature has of a vacuum. With adequate profit, capital becomes bold. Ten per cent is safe, and it can be employed anywhere; 20 per cent, it becomes lively; 50 per cent, positively reckless; for 100 per cent, it tramples all human laws underfoot; 300 per cent, and there is no crime it will not risk, even at the risk of the gallows. If turmoil and strife bring profit, it will encourage both.'"²⁴⁸

What a brutal, creative, intelligent, highly potent monster! Marx biographer Jürgen Neffe imagines it as a "voracious, insatiable octopus condemned to eternal growth, devouring everything that comes too close to it" and attests that the book *Capital* has the qualities of a horror story, as were often written in the 19th century.²⁴⁹

"Just" metaphors?

There is no question that Marx did *not* believe that capital was a human being. When he fantasises that capital comes into the world "from head to toe, dripping with blood and filth from every pore", this is a metaphor, a poetic image.²⁵⁰

Instead of the "actual meaning of the word", the metaphor "conveys something else",²⁵¹ the "actual expression is replaced by something that is supposed to be clearer, more vivid or

²⁴¹ Marx 2021, p. 432.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 328.

²⁴³ Ibid., pp. 328, 350.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 331f., 342, 430, 328.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 285.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 304.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 788, footnote 250. Author: T. J. Dunning. Encourage: to give courage. The quote proves that Marx was not alone in his personification of capital.

²⁴⁹ Neffe 2017, pp. 387, 410. Steinfeld (2017, pp. 118–121) points out that Marx repeatedly depicts capital as a vampire. Perhaps Marx was also drawing on the poetic ambitions of his youth (Heinrich 2018, pp. 198–209) with these stylistic devices.

²⁵⁰ Hans Hiebel (2019), who has devoted a separate book to the "metaphors of Karl Marx" used in *Capital*, points out that the number of metaphors in volumes 2 and 3 is significantly reduced (ibid., pp. 8f.).

²⁵¹ Mittelstraß 2004, vol. 2, p. 867.

linguistically richer".²⁵² Metaphors therefore always produce an "excess" of information, "which is both stimulating and irritating".²⁵³

This stylistic device can also be used to vary, illustrate, embellish or ironise a scientifically outlined fact, enriching a text and making it more understandable and emotional.

However, this metaphorical paraphrasing must not contradict the original message. Due to their necessarily more interpretable formulations, metaphors can only be used in addition to scientific "plain language". Where there is no "actual expression", it cannot be replaced by poetic images.

But what is the "actual expression" in Marx?

Animism?

Capital as a value that has already gained value in the capitalist production and trade process is, of course, real, for example in the form of banknotes or coins, bank accounts, real estate. What happens when we insert this real capital into some of Marx's quotations? A hundred-mark note recognises the "development of productive forces" as its "historical task". A pile of dollar coins "unconsciously creates the material conditions for a higher form of production". A bank account throws itself "with all its might and full consciousness into the production of relative surplus value". A property defies "the pleasure of not only making eight-year-old workers' children work incessantly from 2 to 8:30 in the evening, but also letting them go hungry!"

Such things work at best in cartoons for children or in animistic ideas of a fundamentally animated world²⁵⁴ – which Marx in no way advocated. This substitution makes no sense.

Capital = capitalism?

Is the concept of capital perhaps a metaphor for the entire social order characterised by private ownership of the means of production?

In 1849, Marx wrote that capital was a "bourgeois mode of production." And: "The modes of production in their entirety constitute what is called the social relations, the society."²⁵⁵

Here, he expresses the strange idea that modes of production are equivalent to society as a whole. Since he quotes the latter again in the first volume of *Capital*,²⁵⁶ he seems to have stuck to this view.²⁵⁷

However, in his view, capital seems to have been only one of several simultaneously existing relations of production and therefore could not represent capitalism as a whole. Already in *the Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels recognised capitalism as a necessary and, in this respect, welcome advance over earlier societies.²⁵⁸ I have not found any evidence that Marx

²⁵² <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metapher> (The German Marxist).

²⁵³ Hänseler 2005, p. 130.

²⁵⁴ On animism: Mittelstraß 2004, vol. 1, p. 117; [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animismus_\(Religion\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animismus_(Religion)).

²⁵⁵ Marx 1961, p. 408.

²⁵⁶ Marx 2021, p. 793, footnote 256.

²⁵⁷ In 1859, he had sounded more cautious: "The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society" (Marx 1971a, p. 8f.).

²⁵⁸ There they described the class that played a decisive role in shaping capitalism as follows: "The bourgeoisie has played a most revolutionary role in history [...], has destroyed all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic conditions [...], has made production and consumption in all countries cosmopolitan. To the great regret of reactionaries, it has pulled the national ground from under the feet of industry. [...] And as in material production, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual products of individual nations become common property [...], and from the many national and local literatures, a world literature is formed.

distanced himself from this assessment. I therefore consider it impossible that he wanted to equate capitalism with an evil entity across the board.

Inserting "capitalism" into his text instead of "capital" would also produce meaningless sentences: Capitalism recognises the "development of productive forces" as its "historical task" and "unconsciously creates the material conditions for a higher form of production". Capitalism is an abstraction, a concept, but not an acting subject; it can neither recognise nor create.

Capitalist instead of capital?

It makes much more sense if we replace the term "capital" in the metaphors quoted above with "capitalists".

Capitalists actually speak, respond, agitate, formulate laws, rant about taxes, wage campaigns, initiate revolts, and celebrate orgies. They are capable of creating "the material conditions for a higher form of production" and throwing themselves "with all their might and full consciousness into the production of relative surplus value." It can truthfully be said of capitalists that they subordinate labour, take over the "command", "management, supervision and mediation" of production, drive it "to the most violent extension of the working day", create a "coercive relationship" "which compels the working class to do more work". At least most capitalists are "reckless with regard to the health and life span of the worker" where they are "not forced by society to be considerate"; many may indeed be driven by "greed for exploitation and lust for power".

If we take a closer look at Marx's text, we find that these statements are essentially already contained in it. What he writes about the monster of capital, he usually formulates again in similar terms for the capitalists. There are important differences, however: here he prefers a comparatively objective and sober tone, largely refrains from moral judgement – and repeatedly excuses entrepreneurs on the grounds that, as "personifications" of capital and driven by economic laws of necessity, they cannot do otherwise. Capitalists are portrayed as powerful in relation to workers, but not as powerful, independent and mystically exalted as the monster of capital, before which they themselves bow down.

There is also some evidence for this: according to Marx, capitalists have an "absolute drive for enrichment," an "indelible passion for profit," and feel a "lust for exploitation." The "production of use values or goods" takes place "for the capitalist and under his control."²⁵⁹ He must "first take the labour power as he finds it on the market", consume this power,²⁶⁰ consume it,²⁶¹ appropriate "the labour itself as a living ferment" by purchasing the labour power.²⁶² The "labour process" is "a process between things that the capitalist has bought, between things that belong to him".²⁶³ The capitalist wants to generate "not only value, but also surplus value,"²⁶⁴ therefore pushes for "an insatiable appetite for overtime" and "an excessive extension of the working day."²⁶⁵ "26 companies" have asked the British government to use "forceful intervention" to prevent the age limit for child labour from being

Through the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, through the infinitely facilitated communications, the bourgeoisie is dragging all nations, even the most barbarous, into civilisation" (Marx/Engels 1972b, pp. 464, 466).

²⁵⁹ Marx 2021, pp. 168 (fn. 9), 418, 192.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 616.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 200.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 251.

raised.²⁶⁶ With "cynical ruthlessness and terrorist energy," the "manufacturers" had broken out in "open revolt" against the law limiting working hours to ten hours, which came into force on 1 May 1848.²⁶⁷ The bourgeoisie uses "state power to 'regulate' wages" in various ways.²⁶⁸

The "command of the capitalist in the field of production" becomes "as indispensable as the command of the general on the battlefield". The "power of Asian and Egyptian kings" has "passed to the capitalist in modern society". He has "unconditional authority [...] over people who are mere links in a mechanism that belongs to them".²⁶⁹ The "social production mechanism, composed of many individual workers, belongs to the capitalist," who "extracts unpaid labour directly from the workers" and "fixes it in commodities." He succeeds both in "selling the goods produced" and in "converting the money extracted from them back into capital," thereby procuring "means of exploitation and enjoyment" for himself.²⁷⁰ The wage labourers, on the other hand, find themselves in "helpless dependence on the factory as a whole, i.e. on the capitalist," are "under the command" of the manufacturer, and belong to him.²⁷¹ Marx repeatedly blurs the boundaries between capital and capitalists in his presentation. Thus, the "rate of surplus value [...] is the exact expression of the degree of exploitation of labour power by capital, or of the worker by the capitalist." "The capitalist" does "in detail what capital does in general in the production of relative surplus value." The purpose and motive of "the capitalist production process" is "the greatest possible self-valorisation of capital, [...] i.e. the greatest possible exploitation of labour power by the capitalist."²⁷² "After me, the deluge!" is

"the rallying cry of every capitalist and every capitalist nation. Capital is therefore ruthless towards the health and lifespan of the worker, where it is not forced to show consideration by society. It responds to complaints about physical and mental deterioration, premature death, and the torture of overwork with the question: Should this torment torment us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)? On the whole, however, this does not depend on the good or evil will of the individual capitalist. Free competition enforces the immanent laws of capitalist production on the individual capitalist as an external law of compulsion."²⁷³

What still distinguishes the capitalist from capital, for example, is that only the latter is born into the world "dripping with blood and filth from every pore," a "living monster" that "hatches" money and "sucks" the labour power out of the proletarians: These attributions are reminiscent of fairy tales such as the cunning, gold-spinning Rumpelstiltskin, horror stories such as Frankenstein's monster,²⁷⁴ or vampire stories, and make capitalism appear superhumanly strong and inhumanly evil.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 286, footnote 114.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 302.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 766.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 350, 353, 377.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 381, 589, 590, 595.

²⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 445, 348, 596.

²⁷² Ibid., pp. 232, 337, 350.

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 285f.

²⁷⁴ Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, in which – as in Marx's *Capital* – the boundaries between the dead and the living are blurred, was published in 1818. Marx's idea (2021, p. 425) that the capitalist is an 'automaton' controlled by capital also fits into the horror genre. A human-like automaton controlled by a villain was created, for example, by E.T.A. Hoffmann in 1816 for his story *The Sandman*.

What exactly Marx may have had in mind in telling an almost identical story twice, with different protagonists and differing attitudes, once as documentation and once as myth, is a matter of speculation. What is clear, however, is what consequences he was able to avoid by doing so.

Marx set out to prove in his book *Capital* that the development of social formations is a "natural historical process" to which humans must submit. Since this is the case, individuals cannot be held responsible for social conditions.²⁷⁵ Those who have no choice in their actions cannot be guilty.

Had he instead exposed the capitalists as guilty and therefore responsible for their actions, as they did have alternatives, his thesis of the inevitable socio-economic development of humanity – fundamental to him and the significance of his teachings – would have collapsed. He avoided this by inventing a superior capital monster, a scapegoat onto which he projected the transgressions, crimes, mental disorders and destructive motivations of factory owners. This monster also functioned as a 'deus ex machina': a divine being conjured up by ancient playwrights to provide a seemingly objective solution to conflicts that were objectively unsolvable, before the astonished eyes of the audience. Thomas Steinfeld notes: In Marx's work, metaphors often serve 'as a magic wand to bring together things that do not quite fit together'.²⁷⁶

Since it was so important for Marx's argument to negate individual scope and motives, it would by no means be in his spirit to replace "capital" with "capitalist" in the quoted formulations. This also means that if we adopt *his* point of view, there is no "actual expression" for what the metaphorical capital entity stands for; this poetic image hangs in the air for him, is pure fantasy – and thus simply unsuitable for a text with scientific pretensions.

Marx labelled a hodgepodge of things that could not be reduced to a common denominator with the term "capital," merging things, people, processes, circumstances, relationships, calculations, the real and the unreal into a merely suggested unity. He *was* therefore never *able* to define "capital." His magnum opus revolves around something that does not exist at all. Marx repeatedly used the method of personifying things to hide open questions as well as the actual human actors. "Capital" continued to play a major role.

Strange beings

In 1843, Marx wrote that "money" had "deprived the whole world, humanity as well as nature, of its peculiar value," "this alien being dominates him, and he worships it."²⁷⁷

In 1844, he attested that labour "produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*."²⁷⁸ In *Capital*, we then learned that "commodity" "loves money,"²⁷⁹ is "a very complicated thing [...], full of metaphysical subtleties and theological quirks" as well as internal communication possibilities. The commodity "canvas," for example, reveals "as soon as it comes into contact with another commodity, the skirt," "its thoughts in the language familiar only to it, the language of commodities."²⁸⁰ We hear that "value" becomes "the subject [!] of a process, in

²⁷⁵ Marx 2021, p. 16.

²⁷⁶ Steinfeld 2017, p. 126.

²⁷⁷ Marx 1976b, p. 375.

²⁷⁸ Marx 1968, p. 511.

²⁷⁹ Marx 2021, p. 122.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 66. Neffe (2017, pp. 406, 410) also quotes this and comments: "It is fascinating how Marx repeatedly transforms seemingly [!] passive objects into active subjects. [...] Commodities [...] take their place in human society as independent beings [...]." It may be fascinating, but it does not make it real.

which it [...] changes its own size, [...] exploits itself. [...] It gives birth to living young or at least lays golden eggs," transforming itself into an "automatic subject."²⁸¹

Marx endowed the relations of production with the same power and vitality as capital by equating the two: "capital is" a "relation of production belonging to a particular historical formation of society".²⁸² He proceeded in the same way with the means of production ("Capital is the means of production transformed into capital")²⁸³ and money: "Every new capital enters the stage for the first time [...] still as money."²⁸⁴

In the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*,²⁸⁵ we then encounter an accumulation of Marx-animated entities:

"On the one hand, large-scale industry itself was only emerging from its infancy, as is already proven by the fact that it only began the periodic cycle of its modern life with the crisis of 1825. On the other hand, the class struggle between capital and labour remained in the background, [...] economically suppressed by the strife between industrial capital and aristocratic land ownership [...]."

Shortly before the end of the third volume of *Capital*, the metaphor that the capitalist is "in fact nothing [...] but personified capital" is repeated, followed by the unpoetic formulation that the capitalist economy is "characterised" by "the reification of the social relations of production and the subjectification of the material foundations of production".²⁸⁶ By "subjectification," Marx did not mean that the individual personality of capitalists – which does not occur in his work – determines the production process, but rather he once again varied the thesis that "capital" acts as a subject.

What Marx had already noted in 1844 seems like a programmatic announcement in this respect: "The more the worker works, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world he creates for himself." The product of his labour exists "independently" of him, as an "autonomous power"; "the life he has given to the object" becomes "hostile" to him: "With the mass of alien objects, [...] the realm of alien beings to which man is subjugated grows."²⁸⁷

Mental states

Marx biographer Michael Heinrich aptly summarises Marx's views on this subject: "In a commodity-producing society, people (all of them!) are in fact under the control of things."²⁸⁸ But things are, by definition, inanimate. They have no thoughts, feelings, will or goals, nor can they control or rule. However, things are *used* by people who want to control and rule or pursue other goals.

A stone lying on the side of the road is not lying in wait for me. I would only be injured by this stone if someone, perhaps an angry person, threw it at me. If I did not see this person and am naive enough, I might imagine that the stone itself wanted to hurt me. But that is just that: imagination.

²⁸¹ Marx 2021, p. 168f. The latter expression is apparently intended to breathe life into a mere neologism (cf.: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatisches_Subjekt).

²⁸² Marx 1983a, p. 822.

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 823.

²⁸⁴ Marx 2021, p. 161.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸⁶ Marx 1983a, p. 832, 838.

²⁸⁷ Marx 1968, p. 512, p. 546.

²⁸⁸ Heinrich 2021, p. 73.

So what did Marx actually express in words and images here? A *psychological* reality: people *feel* as if they are controlled by things, they convince themselves of this, allow themselves to be persuaded of it – and behave accordingly. They build themselves a clay idol and worship it as a powerful ruler.

Michael Heinrich writes that "objective domination" exists solely "*because people relate to these things in a particular way*".²⁸⁹ In other words, the *supposed* rule of things ends as soon as people relate to things in a different way, when they deal with them in a realistic manner, put an end to suggestion and autosuggestion, brainwashing, demystify the idol, identify those behind it and disempower them.

Where Marx believed he was observing objective economic factors at work, he was in fact often describing *mental* states. More precisely: the mental states of individuals who had been raised in an authoritarian manner and were thus alienated from themselves.²⁹⁰

The authoritarian character is marked by two main courses of action: kowtowing to those above and kicking those below. This "cyclist personality" is instilled, to a greater or lesser extent, in all members of patriarchal-hierarchical social orders from birth. It therefore connects "above" with "below", but can be acted upon differently at the top of the power pyramid than at its base.²⁹¹ Those who manage to become leading capitalists or one of their privileged henchmen can "kick". The "workers" and the rest of the population are encouraged to kowtow. The majority comply. But, as shown, there is considerable leeway, especially for capitalists.

Marx correctly perceived and described the *behaviour* of most people under capitalism. But he drew the wrong conclusion that they *must* behave in this way.

To avoid this, he would have had to abandon his fixation on economics in favour of a more holistic, not least psychological, perspective. Of course, how could he have done that? He believed what he thought he had recognised to be *a law of nature*.

Social laws

In 1844, Friedrich Engels wrote: "The law of competition is that demand and supply" of products cannot be controlled "because in this unconscious state of humanity, no one knows" what products are actually needed or marketable. Since the capitalist economy therefore never reaches a "healthy state," this inevitably leads to crises, which ultimately lead to revolutions. Engels emphasised that this was "a pure law of nature." He dismissed the objection that seemed obvious to him: "What are we to think of a law that can only be enforced through periodic revolutions?" "It is simply a law of nature based on the unconsciousness of those involved."²⁹² In order to accept this as a natural and therefore inevitable effect, Engels would have had to classify "unconsciousness" as inevitable as well. Instead, he added the exhortation: "Produce consciously, as human beings, not as fragmented atoms without class consciousness, and you will be beyond all these artificial and untenable contradictions."²⁹³ The fact that this liberating blow would also cause that "law of nature" to vanish into thin air seems

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ See Peglau 2018a.

²⁹¹ In 1844, Marx formulated something that, in my opinion, came quite close to this view. He wrote that the "proprietary class" and the proletariat experienced "the same human alienation." However, the former felt "comfortable and affirmed" in this situation, experiencing it "as *their own* power," which gave them "*the appearance* of a human existence." The workers, on the other hand, felt "destroyed by alienation," perceiving it as "their powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence" (Marx/Engels 1972a, p. 37).

²⁹² Engels 1981, p. 514.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 515.

to have irritated neither him nor Marx, who approvingly refers to the first lines of this passage in *Capital*.²⁹⁴

The latter is not surprising: such "laws" abound in Marx's main work. Already in the preface, there is talk of "the natural laws of capitalist production," which operate and prevail "with iron necessity." Marx states that the "ultimate purpose" of his book is "to reveal the economic law of motion of modern society." He regards the "development of the economic formation of society" as a "natural historical process",²⁹⁵ and the "natural phases of development" of society "can neither be skipped nor decreed away".²⁹⁶

To list just a few more examples: there are "laws of simple relative expression of value," a "blindly operating average law of irregularity," the "law that the quantity of means of circulation determines," "the laws of money circulation," the "law of speculation," laws "about the nature of commodities, value, money," the "law of commodity exchange", the "immanent laws of simple commodity circulation", the "natural laws of the modern mode of production",²⁹⁷ the "compulsory laws of competition", the "law of value determination by working time", the "law of valorisation", the "*absolute, general law of capitalist accumulation*".²⁹⁸

Marx adds to the latter that it is "modified in its realisation by manifold circumstances, like all other laws". Anyone hoping for more detailed information will be disappointed: Marx dismisses this, saying that "their analysis does not belong here".²⁹⁹

His assessment that the "working class [...] recognises the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident laws of nature due to its education, tradition and habits" also contains a degree of relativisation.³⁰⁰ This is also one of the places where Marx seems to hint that he is dealing with *mental* states.³⁰¹ For it sounds as if workers imagine that these are laws of nature; if they were to withdraw their recognition of this view or make changes in education, tradition and habit, those "laws" would be done away with. But Marx does not pursue this either.

Some laws, he says, could "transform" into one another, such as the "laws governing the change in the price of labour power and surplus value [...] into laws governing wages". Or: to the same extent that commodity production "develops into capitalist production according to its own immanent laws, the laws of property in commodity production are transformed into laws of capitalist appropriation."³⁰²

Marx makes it clear several times that the equation with physical or biological laws of nature, with factors that are unchangeable in the long term and independent of humans, is to be taken literally.³⁰³ Thus, "socially necessary labour time imposes itself as a regulating law of nature, just as the law of gravity imposes itself when a house collapses on your head."³⁰⁴ Social caste divisions and craft guilds, he says, "arise from the same natural law that governs the

²⁹⁴ Marx 2021, p. 89, footnote 28.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 12, 15f., 16.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. Even though Marx uses the term "natural" in relation to economic processes, what he usually means is: independent of humans.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 299.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 114, 117, 136, 141, 224, 170, 248f., 172, 299, 335, 337, 343, 674.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 765.

³⁰¹ Another passage is a footnote in which Marx (ibid., p. 72) states that someone is "only king, for example, because other people behave as his subjects. Conversely, they believe themselves to be subjects because he is king."

³⁰² Ibid., pp. 565, 613.

³⁰³ He was therefore not concerned with something that was not even discussed in academia at the time and which is now referred to as stochastic or statistical laws: correlations that only prevail with a certain probability. The word "probable" appears in all three volumes of *Capital* almost exclusively in quotations and is certainly not used to relativise Marx's "laws".

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 89. Hiebel (2019, p. 32) comments: "Marx should have put 'natural law' in quotation marks here, because a social regulation is not a natural law. 'Natural law' is clearly used here as a metaphor." But Hiebels latter sentence is simply incorrect – and that is why the quotation marks are missing.

separation of plants and animals into species and subspecies."³⁰⁵ The "change of labour" prevails "as an overwhelming natural law and with the blind destructive effect of a natural law",³⁰⁶ i.e. analogous to a natural disaster. And we learn that "social production" behaves "just like celestial bodies," which, "once hurled in a certain direction, always repeat the same motion."³⁰⁷

In 1868, Marx reiterated in a letter: "Natural laws cannot be abolished at all."³⁰⁸

Seemingly prevailing coincidences

But how are all these socio-economic (natural) laws supposed to prevail when they encounter countless people who are of different "physical constitutions," live in a wide variety of "geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic & other"³⁰⁹ conditions, have different dispositions, interests, class affiliations, and differ from one another in terms of "sex, age and skill,"³¹⁰ level of education, experience and many other factors?

Since Marx so often refers to "laws," the credibility of his concepts depends to a large extent on how this question can be answered. When Engels commented on this again in 1886, he returned to the idea of "unconsciousness":

"In nature, it is [...] nothing but unconscious blind agents,³¹¹ interacting with each other and in whose interaction the general law comes into effect. [...] In contrast, in the history of society, the actors are nothing but conscious beings, acting with deliberation or passion, working towards specific goals; nothing happens without conscious intention, without a desired goal. But this difference [...] cannot change the fact that the course of history is governed by internal general laws. For here too, despite the consciously desired goals of all individuals, chance seems to prevail on the surface. Only rarely does what is intended happen; in most cases, the many intended purposes thwart and conflict with each other, or these purposes themselves are unfeasible from the outset, or the means are insufficient. Thus, the clashes of countless individual wills and individual actions in the historical sphere bring about a state of affairs that is entirely analogous to that prevailing in unconscious nature. [...] But where chance plays its part on the surface, it is always governed by inner, hidden laws, and it is only a matter of discovering these laws."³¹²

³⁰⁵ Marx 2021, p. 360.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 511.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 662. In the 19th century, however, the expectation that human development could be recorded as accurately as natural processes was not uncommon among scientists, especially ethnologists (Kuckenburger 2021, pp. 56–58).

³⁰⁸ Marx 1974, p. 532.

³⁰⁹ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 8.

³¹⁰ Marx 2021, p. 477.

³¹¹ Driving forces.

³¹² Engels 1975a, pp. 296f. Two years earlier, he had already stated: "But chance is only one pole of a connection whose other pole is necessity. In nature, where chance also seems to reign, we have long since demonstrated in every single area the inner necessity and regularity that prevails in this chance. But what applies to nature also applies to society. The more a social activity, a series of social processes, becomes too powerful for people to consciously control, the more it seems to be left to pure chance, the more its peculiar, inherent laws prevail in this chance, as if by natural necessity. Such laws also govern the contingencies of commodity production and exchange [...]" (Engels 1975b, p. 169). Marx argues similarly in a letter from 1868: "World history would be [...] very mystical in nature if 'contingencies' played no role. These contingencies naturally fall into the general course of development and are compensated for by other contingencies." In the third volume of *Capital*, he then stated that "the sphere of competition" was, when viewed in each individual case, "governed by chance". However, "the internal law that prevails in these coincidences and regulates them" becomes "visible" as soon as these coincidences "are aggregated in large masses" (Marx 1983a, p. 835).

I consider this argument to be unsubstantiated, unprovable and tautological: because these laws exist, they simply operate according to the law; therefore, both chance and the people affected have no choice but to implement them, and that's that!

This also contradicts the considerations – which I consider justified – made by Marx and Engels in 1845, at the beginning of their collaboration: "The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas in every epoch, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* power of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* power."³¹³ *The Communist Manifesto* then stated: "The ruling ideas of each age have always been the ideas of the ruling class."³¹⁴ Instead of lawful coincidences, it was still a matter of – changeable! – power structures that prevent the will of the vast majority from prevailing against the interests of the rulers.

Laws of nature

According to the 2021 edition of *the Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, a law of nature is "a regularity recognised in the natural sciences, especially in physics, chemistry, biology, applied natural sciences such as geology or medicine, and to some extent in biological psychology, which is objectively and universally valid".³¹⁵ During Marx's lifetime, the explanation was less precise; it was understood to mean "'laws according to which changes in nature take place'. All changes that could be derived in mathematical formulas were considered scientifically explainable".³¹⁶

However, I cannot imagine a law of nature whose effect is first produced by the objects affected by it, in that "in most cases" their objectives "interfere" with each other or fail in some other way.

The Tübingen philosopher Karl Theodor Groos illustrated this in 1926 with an example: even if snowflakes are initially "whirled up by the wind instead of falling to the ground according to the law of gravity", gravity acts on them from the outset and throughout³¹⁷ – the law of gravity does not only come into effect when they fly in different directions and perhaps collide at some point. And gravity certainly does not come about by chance. Quite apart from the fact that snowflakes do not "want" anything, do not bring their own momentum into the process, and do not set out to cheat gravity.³¹⁸

Questionable foresight

Wikipedia tells us that there is no "precise, uniform and conclusive definition of the term" natural law and that this word is used "in natural sciences and scientific theory to describe the regularity of natural phenomena that is independent of place and time and based on natural constants". Because of the latter characteristics, natural laws allowed "observable

³¹³ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 60, further explanations on this *ibid.*, pp. 60–66.

³¹⁴ Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 480. Wilhelm Reich (1933, p. 12) later gave this a psychosocial foundation: "In class society, it is the ruling class that secures its position with the help of education and the institution of the family by making its ideologies the ruling ideologies of all members of society."

³¹⁵ Sandkühler 2021, p. 1728. Nature, it also says (*ibid.*, p. 1705), is "a collective term used to describe areas of reality that arise or exist without human intervention. In this sense, nature is also used as a counter-concept to the terms 'culture' and 'society'." Seen in this light, Marx would have had no chance of finding socio-economic laws of nature.

³¹⁶ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturgesetz>

³¹⁷ Gross 1926, p. 8.

³¹⁸ Popper also argued against the predictability of social developments through what he saw as a "historicism" stretching from antiquity to Marx in 1974 (see also Gmainer-Pranzl 2019). Erpenbeck (2023, pp. 169–177), who partly criticises Popper's view, nevertheless agrees that valid predictions for long-term social developments are impossible.

events to be explained and predicted".³¹⁹ However, many of the predictions made by Marx and Engels did not come true, especially with regard to political upheavals. The 1848 *manifesto* stated that the "German bourgeois revolution [...] can only be the immediate prelude to a proletarian revolution".³²⁰ In the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in January 1849, Marx announced in his "Contents of the Year 1849": "Revolutionary uprising of the French working class, world war."³²¹ A few months later, Engels reported in the same newspaper: "A few more days, then, and [...] the Magyar [= Hungarian] revolution will be over, and the second German revolution will have begun in the most magnificent way."³²² In 1850, both informed their comrades-in-arms: "The revolution [...] is imminent,"³²³ "cannot be long in coming."³²⁴ Engels' assessment of the situation in 1854 was: "From Manchester to Rome, from Paris to Warsaw and Pest",³²⁵ the revolution was "omnipresent, raising its head and awakening from slumber".³²⁶ Marx announced in 1863, "We will soon have a revolution", "we are obviously heading for a revolution – something I have never doubted since 1850."³²⁷ Although they expressed their expectations less frequently and less enthusiastically in later years, Marx, seemingly undeterred by the aforementioned and other failed predictions,³²⁸ claimed in the first volume of *Capital* that "with the mass of employed workers [...] their resistance" would grow and that the "inevitable conquest of political power by the working class" would occur.³²⁹ "With the steadily decreasing number of capital magnates," resistance would grow:

"The mass of misery, oppression, servitude, degeneration, exploitation, but also the indignation of the ever-growing working class, trained, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist production process.³³⁰ [...] The centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point where they become

³¹⁹ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturgesetz>. Similarly: Sandkühler 2021, p. 1728.

³²⁰ Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 493. In other respects, too, they assessed the situation there (ibid., pp. 473f.) as partly unrealistic: "It is now clear that the bourgeoisie is incapable of remaining the ruling class of society any longer and of imposing the conditions of life of its class on society as the ruling law. It is incapable of ruling because it is incapable of securing the existence of its slaves even within their slavery, because it is forced to let them sink into a position where it must feed them instead of being fed by them. Society can no longer live under it, i.e., its life is no longer compatible with society. [...] With the development of large-scale industry, the very basis on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates its products is being swept away from under its feet. It produces above all its own gravedigger. Its downfall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable." Steinfeld (2017, pp. 33–47) points out that the proletariat to which Marx and Engels addressed themselves was only just emerging in 1848: "The 'Manifesto' seeks to conjure up a historical subject that hardly exists yet, with the possible exception of England and Paris" (ibid., p. 40). At that time, "perhaps a thousand people in Europe, perhaps a few more" called themselves "communists," including some scholars such as Marx and Engels, who were "driven from one exile to the next" (ibid., p. 36). Even the "League of Communists" for which the *Manifesto* had been written dissolved after four years. The "spectre of communism" (Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 461) haunting Europe in 1848 was thus far weaker than the *Manifesto* suggested. In *The German Ideology*, they had already anticipated "millions of proletarians or communists" in 1845/46 (Marx/Engels 2017, p. 58). Pagel (2020, p. 403) states: At that time, the proletariat remained "completely untouched" by "communist agitation".

³²¹ Marx 1959, p. 150.

³²² Engels 1961, p. 474.

³²³ Marx/Engels 1960a, p. 245.

³²⁴ Marx/Engels 1960b, p. 312.

³²⁵ District of present-day Budapest.

³²⁶ Engels 1977a, p. 8.

³²⁷ Marx/Engels 1974, p. 333, 641.

³²⁸ See the lists in Löw, pp. 331–336 and: https://marx-forum.de/marx-lexikon/lexikon_ij/irrtum.html.

³²⁹ Marx 2021, pp. 350, 512.

³³⁰ How this "mechanism", which above all had an alienating and even murderous effect, was suddenly supposed to achieve such constructive results remained Marx's secret. He himself had also pointed out that "increased exploitation [...] and an increase in the standard of living of the working class" were by no means mutually exclusive (Heinrich 2021, p. 119).

incompatible with their capitalist shell. It is blown apart. The hour of capitalist private property strikes. The expropriators are expropriated."³³¹

"Capitalist production" generates "its own negation with the necessity of a natural process".³³² In 1880, thirteen years later, Engels also believed that in the "trusts" that were emerging at the time as a result of monopoly formation, "exploitation would become so blatant that it would have to collapse. No people would tolerate production managed by trusts,³³³ such blatant exploitation of the whole by a small band of coupon clippers".³³⁴ However, this is still or once again the case for most peoples today – and in a much more acute form. In 2017, the eight richest men in the world owned "more capital than the poorer half of the world's population"; "99 per cent" of people suffered "massive disadvantages" as a result.³³⁵ In Germany in 2020, one per cent of adults owned 35 per cent of the total wealth. During – and as a result of – the coronavirus "pandemic"³³⁶, ten of the world's richest men doubled their wealth since 2020.³³⁷ At least in the "West," the elite coup touted as the "Great Reset" and "New Green Deal," including the planned disempowerment and impoverishment of the populations, as well as the surge in arms production since the Ukraine crisis, are likely to have further advanced the concentration of capital.

According to Marx and Engels, the socialist revolution is therefore long overdue, even globally. But it is not in sight.

What actually followed the deaths of Marx and Engels were, among other things, two world wars, fascism, "real socialism" complete with Stalinism, a capitalist "West" where workers achieved greater prosperity despite the concentration of capital, and then the collapse of the socialist world system in favour of almost global neoliberalisation. And now, currently, the majority of the world is fighting for multipolarity and against the US-led "West" – a struggle primarily between states with capitalist economies, but one that nevertheless has its justification on the non-Western side.

Little of this can be reconciled with Marx's predictions or explained in "Marxist" terms, nor can the socio-economic constitution of today's China.³³⁸ The philosopher Volker Riedel sums it up:

"First of all, Marx made serious historical misjudgements with regard to the transition from capitalism to socialism. He overestimated the viability of the capitalist mode of production as well as the potential of the socialist mode, failing to foresee reformism in the labour movement or to take into account the momentum of bureaucratic

³³¹ Marx 2021, p. 790f. Last sentence: Those who previously stole the workers' labour power are now themselves being expropriated.

³³² Ibid., p. 791.

³³³ Engels 1973, p. 221. As late as 1890, Engels wrote to Marx's daughter Laura: "20 February 1890 is the day the German revolution began. It may take a few more years before we experience a decisive crisis, and it is not impossible that we will suffer a temporary and serious defeat. But the old stability is gone forever" (Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 359). In 1892, he remained confident: "Of course, the next revolution, which is being prepared in Germany with unparalleled persistence and consistency, will come in its own time, let's say between 1898 and 1904" (Marx/Engels 1979, p. 545).

³³⁴ Synonym for capitalists who make profits without any effort of their own, i.e. the group to which Engels himself belonged from 1869 onwards.

³³⁵ See <https://taz.de/Neue-Studie-zur-Verteilung-von-Reichtum/!5371707/>.

³³⁶ Peglau 2020a.

³³⁷ Oxfam 2022. By 2023, "the richest one per cent of the world's population had pocketed around two-thirds of global wealth growth since the start of the coronavirus pandemic." In Germany, "of the wealth growth generated in Germany in 2020 and 2021, [...] 81 per cent to the richest one per cent of the population" (<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/zahlen-veroeffentlicht-konzerne-und-milliardaere-bereichern-sich-an-den-krisen-li.307327>).

³³⁸ Elsner 2020; Peglau 2021.

apparatuses. In addition, he [...] incorrectly predicted the course of the proletarian revolution [...]."³³⁹

It is not only the quality of the predictions that casts doubt on the natural laws assumed by Marx and Engels.

Limited view of the past

In *the Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels proclaimed: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."³⁴⁰ When Engels republished this work 40 years later, new ethnological knowledge had become available, which Marx and he had examined.³⁴¹ Engels now added a succinct footnote to the sentence from the *Manifesto*: "That is to say, strictly speaking, the history handed down in writing"³⁴² – which perhaps meant: as long as there are written records, class struggles are reflected in them.

In the *preface* to this new publication, Engels narrowed it down further: since the demise of what he assumed to be primitive communism,³⁴³ "the history of mankind [...] has been a history of class struggles".³⁴⁴ In doing so, he also admitted that for the vast majority of human history – even according to the knowledge available at the time – class struggle, the driving force to which Marx and he attached such great importance, could not be used to justify social change.

The sequence of social formations, which they derived from the presumed course of economic development, was also built on shaky ground.

In draft letters written in 1881, Marx argued that a "primitive social formation" was followed by formations based on "private property", first "slavery", then "serfdom", and finally feudalism.³⁴⁵ Engels described his similar view in his 1884 work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Agreeing with the ethnologist Lewis Morgan, he assumed that the earliest epochs were "savagery" and "barbarism".³⁴⁶ According to this view, the "three great forms of servitude" arose, "as characteristic of the three great epochs of civilisation": "Slavery is the first, peculiar to the ancient world, form of exploitation; it is followed by serfdom in the Middle Ages and wage labour in modern times."³⁴⁷

³³⁹ Riedel 2004, p. 108.

³⁴⁰ Marx/Engels 1959, p. 462.

³⁴¹ In his final years, Marx studied ethnological literature intensively, but did not publish anything on the subject. Excerpts have been preserved (Marx 1976c; see also Krader 1973, Conversano 2018, p. 9f.), which Engels later used.

³⁴² Marx/Engels 1959, p. 462.

³⁴³ Here he speaks of "the primitive gentile order with its common ownership of land" (Engels 1977b, p. 581). In 1884, he had described this order as "a wonderful constitution in all its childishness and simplicity [...]. Without soldiers, gendarmes and police, without nobility, kings, governors, prefects or judges, without prisons, without trials, everything runs its course in an orderly manner. All quarrels and disputes are decided by the community of those concerned. [...] the household is communal and communist, the land is tribal property, only the small gardens are temporarily assigned to the households [...]. There can be no poor or needy [...] All are equal and free – even the women" (Engels 1975b, p. 95f.; cf. Marx/Engels 1968, p. 427; Marx 1983a, p. 911). Whether such a stage of human development actually existed universally can never be proven beyond doubt due to a lack of relevant archaeological finds (Röder/Hummel/Kunz 2001, p. 396). However, it appears that several egalitarian urban social structures functioned for more than a thousand years over the last 10,000 years (Graeber/Wengrow 2022, p. 236, 245ff.).

³⁴⁴ Engels 1977b, p. 581.

³⁴⁵ Marx 1973b, p. 404.

³⁴⁶ Engels 1975b, pp. 30–35. "Savagery – period of predominant appropriation of ready-made natural products [...]. Barbarism – period of the acquisition of animal husbandry and agriculture, the learning of methods for increased production of natural products through human activity. Civilisation – period of learning the further processing of natural products, actual industry and art" (ibid. p. 35).

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 170.

Both Marx and Engels not only contradicted their own statements here.³⁴⁸ They also ignored research findings known to them, including those on early Egyptian and South American cultures.³⁴⁹

Their classification thus remained limited to "Western-style societies." The oldest advanced civilisations "of the global South and East, with their sometimes significantly weaker private property rights" and the lesser importance of slavery, were "quasi excluded by definition from belonging to [...] 'civilisation'".³⁵⁰

Science journalist Martin Kuckenburg has devoted a four-volume study to these connections. He sums up: Ultimately, Marx and Engels remained stuck in the Eurocentric prejudices typical of their time about societies with partly "persisting collectivist structures and their significantly different [...] path of development".³⁵¹

Wishful thinking

Another objection seems even more significant to me: natural laws are and were usually understood as relationships independent of humans. But how could there ever be social, political and economic processes that are independent of humans – as their agents!³⁵² All these social, political and economic phenomena only take place because and as long as humans exist.³⁵³

Let us take another look at how Marx and Engels justified their hopes for change in the passages just quoted. Against capitalism, which was supposedly becoming increasingly unbearable, the growing working class would *offer* more and more *resistance* and *become* increasingly *indignant* – especially since the "mechanism of the capitalist production process" *trained, united and organised* the workers. Surely no people would *tolerate* such blatant exploitation by such a small group as that which capital concentration would bring about. So this was largely a matter of *psychological* processes, emotions and motivations, and the actions that arose from them. And now, once again, Marx and Engels were paying the price for dismissing this area so superficially. For, as already described, their predictions in this regard were wishful thinking.

One could counter this by saying that Marx and Engels wanted above all to analyse economic relationships and could not tackle everything at once. True! But the fact that they

³⁴⁸ See Marx/Engels 1963, p. 284; Marx 1971a, p. 9; Engels 1962a, pp. 164f.; Kuckenburg 2023, pp. 26–31.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 48–105.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 105. Tedesco (2022) points out that some contemporary historians also criticise the "weaknesses" of the "traditional Marxist" view of history, such as its Eurocentricity, and are "developing a new frame of reference for interpreting pre-capitalist societies [...]". He cites Perry Anderson, Jairus Banaji, John Haldon and Chris Wickham as representatives of this view.

³⁵² Hiebel (2017, p. 152) apparently sees it the same way, but again attempts to "rescue" Marx in the same way as before: "I think one must see 'law' [...] as a metaphor. 'Law' as a scientifically based term for natural laws cannot really be used for historical and social phenomena."

³⁵³ As early as 1890, the economist Conrad Schmidt put his finger on this sore point. He wrote to Engels that Marx's theory could only be upheld if it could be proven that non-materialistic processes could also be explained in economic terms. According to the publicist Paul Kampfmeyer in a 1932 obituary (p. 902f.), Schmidt was reluctant "to describe Marx's view of history as materialistic. In truth, it is an economic worldview." I also find apt what journalist Klaus Weinert (2013) wrote: "When people talk about 'laws' or 'natural laws' in economics, extreme caution is always required. Economics is not a natural science. And there are no laws in economics as there are in physics. Gravity cannot be overturned by a parliamentary decision anywhere in the world, but the austerity measures for southern Europe or the Hartz IV laws could be changed." The latter "laws" only work "as long as people agree on a certain system."

nevertheless made unqualified statements about psychological processes ran counter to their claim to be conducting empirical science and led them astray in the passages mentioned.³⁵⁴

And, to repeat: they did not need to do so. For they could draw on previous work known to them. I will mention just two striking examples.

Manufactured immaturity

In 1784, the 60-year-old philosopher Immanuel Kant published his essay *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Kant begins with a bang:

*"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in a lack of understanding, but in a lack of resolve and courage to use it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! is therefore the motto of enlightenment."*³⁵⁵

Kant sees "laziness and cowardice" as the deeper causes of "why so many people", including "the entire fair sex",

*"gladly remain immature throughout their lives; and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, etc., then I do not need to make any effort myself."*³⁵⁶

The "step towards maturity" is "inconvenient". The fact that it is – wrongly – considered dangerous at the same time

*"is ensured by those guardians who have kindly taken on the supervision [...]. After first making their domestic animals stupid and carefully preventing these quiet creatures from venturing a step outside the pram in which they are locked up, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone."*³⁵⁷

It is therefore "difficult for each individual to work his way out of the immaturity that has almost become second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is for the time being truly incapable of using his own understanding, because he has never been allowed to try."³⁵⁸

Of course, from today's perspective, there is much to criticise, such as the devaluation of women, the fixation on "reason," and the blanket accusation that immaturity is due to laziness and cowardice. But Kant's article contained something that was missing from the sentence in

³⁵⁴ Lange (1955, p. 44) writes: "Marx does not claim that historical events and institutions, especially religion, science, ethical and philosophical ideas and the like, can be reduced to economic motives; rather, he attempts only to explain the *economic conditions* for their formation and transformation." While I agree with the first statement, I cannot confirm the self-restraint implied at the end. Marx does not deny that there are other influencing factors besides the economic ones he researched, but he considers them to be comparatively unimportant; I have not been able to discover any integration, subordination, let alone subordination to a larger whole.

³⁵⁵ Kant 2004, p. 5.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

the 1848 *manifesto* – "The ruling ideas of each age have always been the ideas of its ruling class"³⁵⁹ – statements about authoritarian character and social structures and considerations of how these are created and how they can be shaken off. Taking into account the socially conditioned inner resistance to independent thinking and action,³⁶⁰ Marx and Engels could have made less optimistic but more realistic predictions.³⁶¹

Ulrich Pagel, co-editor of *the reconstructed German Ideology*, points out that the "classical Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century" – including Kant – *shared* the conviction that prevailing power relations were the "result of relationships entered into on the assumption of their supposed necessity," which people therefore "ultimately entered into voluntarily." According to Pagel, this view was also characteristic of Max Stirner.³⁶²

Inculcated submissiveness

Stirner, who worked as a teacher, understood more concretely than Kant how the psychological deformation known as education begins in childhood. In 1842, he wrote in one of his newspaper articles:³⁶³

"As in certain other spheres, in the educational sphere too, freedom is not allowed to break through, the power of opposition is not allowed to have its say: submissiveness is what is wanted. Only formal and material training is intended [...]. Our good stock of naughtiness is forcibly stifled, and with it the development of knowledge of free will. [...] Just as we became accustomed in childhood to finding ourselves in everything that was assigned to us, so later we find and send ourselves into positive life, send ourselves into time, become its servants and so-called good citizens. Where, then, is a spirit of opposition strengthened in place of the submissiveness that has been nurtured until now, [...] where is the free human being considered the goal, and not merely the educated one?"

In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner's book, which Marx and Engels worked on in 1845/46, it was then said about the "effectiveness of sanctimonious minds" that their "moral influence" begins "where humiliation begins; indeed, it is nothing other than this humiliation itself." In this way, man should be made to

"bow down [...] be obedient [...] surrender their will to a foreign one that is established as a rule and law; they should humble themselves before a higher power: self-humiliation. [...] Yes, yes, children must be encouraged to be pious, godly and respectable from an early age; a well-educated person is one who has been taught and impressed upon, drummed into, hammered into and preached to about 'good principles'." ³⁶⁴

And this not only by teachers and priests, but starting in the family. Stirner reports how the "punishing rod" and "stern expression of the father" feared by the child ultimately become the conscience that torments adults throughout their lives.³⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud would later

³⁵⁹ Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 480.

³⁶⁰ Fromm (1989a) then called it "fear of freedom".

³⁶¹ On the intellectual gains that Marx and Engels were able to derive from reading Kant: Schmidt 1903; Vorländer 2011.

³⁶² Pagel 2020, p. 386.

³⁶³ Stirner 2023, p. 45f.

³⁶⁴ Stirner 2016, p. 90f.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 19f.

summarise this in the term "superego". Stirner sums up what authoritarian education leaves as an alternative: "either the stick overcomes the person or the person overcomes the stick".³⁶⁶

Ulrich Pagel therefore rightly praises "the exposure of power relations as power relationships that owe their existence and rigidity to unconscious and constantly repeated acts of submission" on the part of the subjects as a "fundamental component" of Stirner's work: Stirner saw "not only the emergence, but also the continued existence of conditions worthy of criticism" as "a consequence of the actions of concrete human individuals".³⁶⁷

As a way out of subjugation, Stirner had already named "revealing" and "finding oneself," the "disposal of all authority," in 1842.³⁶⁸ *The Ego and Its Own* reads like an individualistic road-map for achieving this goal, only touching on socio-economic issues. I therefore believe that Stirner needed to supplement his ideas with the insights of Marx and Engels in this regard. But the reverse was also true: Marx and Engels would have been well advised to use Stirner's approaches for a psychological understanding of social processes.

However, how the psychological structure of people outside and prior to the sphere of production, especially in childhood, was shaped was of marginal interest to Marx and Engels at best. Coupled with the overvaluation of "work" and their belief in progress, this led Marx to conclusions that I find inhumane.

Child labour

In 1866, Marx wrote "Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional Central Council" of the International Workingmen's Association. It stated:

"We regard the tendency of modern industry to draw children and young people of both sexes into the great work of social production as a progressive, healthy and justified tendency, although the manner in which this tendency is realised under the rule of capital is abominable."³⁶⁹

In other words: child labour should be maintained because it is progressive in principle. Therefore, it would continue to be necessary even under socialism:³⁷⁰

"In a rational state of society, every child from the age of 9 should become a productive worker, just as no adult capable of working should be exempt from the general law of nature, namely to work in order to eat, and to work not only with the brain, but also with the hands."³⁷¹ [...]

For physical reasons, we consider it necessary that children and young people of both sexes be divided into three groups, which must be treated differently. The first group should comprise those aged 9 to 12, the second those aged 13 to 15, and the third

³⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶⁷ Pagel 2020, pp. 386, 388.

³⁶⁸ Stirner 2023, p. 43f.

³⁶⁹ Marx 1962a, p. 193.

³⁷⁰ In 1819, the first "Workers' Protection Act" was enacted in England for the widespread textile industry. It included a ban on the employment of children under the age of 9. Marx therefore complied with the legal requirements in this case. However, compliance with this law was initially hardly monitored (Schultz 1948, pp. 27f.). In the 1830s, further regulations followed in England and Prussia to restrict child labour (cf. Böning 2012).

³⁷¹ This "general law of nature," from which one could surprisingly be "exempt," does not exist either. As already quoted, Marx (1983b, p. 384) wrote of "migration" as "the first form of existence" in which "the tribe [...] grazes on whatever it finds." For himself, the intellectual Marx does not seem to have considered this law of nature to be valid anyway.

those aged 16 and 17. We propose that the employment of the first group in any workshop or domestic work be limited by law to two hours, that of the second to four hours, and that of the third to six hours. For the third group, there must be a break of at least one hour for meals or rest."³⁷²

Marx seems to have regarded the propagation of this vision as the implementation of his demand set out in the "Instructions": "The *rights* of children and young people must be protected. They are not capable of acting for themselves. It is therefore the duty of society to stand up for them."³⁷³ In this sense, he also demanded that child labour at night and in occupations harmful to health be prohibited and that it be combined with "elementary education": "Neither parents nor employers should be allowed [...] to employ young people unless it is connected with education." This should be understood to mean: "*Intellectual education*. [...] *Physical education*, as provided in gymnastic schools and through military exercises [!]. [...] *Polytechnic education*, which teaches the general principles of all production processes."³⁷⁴ A year later, in 1867, *Capital* stated that the "seed of the education of the future, which will combine productive work with instruction and gymnastics for all children above a certain age," was "not only [...] a method of increasing social production, but [...] the only method of producing fully developed human beings."³⁷⁵ So once again, human beings were to be "produced": Marx could not escape the economics of it all. In 1875, he still considered a "general ban on child labour" to be

"incompatible with the existence of large-scale industry and therefore an empty pious wish. Its implementation – if possible – would be reactionary [!], since, with strict regulation of working hours according to different age groups and other precautions to protect children, the early combination of productive work with education is one of the most powerful means of transforming today's society".³⁷⁶

As Marx knew and had documented on several occasions, every month of child labour cost thousands of children their health or their lives. Nevertheless, he considered it more important to promote the socialist transformation of society through child labour – supposedly. "Large-scale industry" would later prove that Marx's assertion of its dependence was incorrect: since the 20th century, the European economy has increasingly managed without child labour.

The existence of child labour probably made it easier for Marx to maintain his thesis that people are shaped by work. However, even in the mid-19th century, children spent most of their early lives at home; their "social existence" was initially a family one. Child labour began at a later age, and not at all for middle-class children.³⁷⁷

Although parents and educators usually imparted social, and not least authoritarian, norms and values, neither families nor schools, universities, nor the kindergartens that emerged in the 19th century applied exactly the same rules as businesses.

³⁷² Marx 1962a, p. 193f.

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 194.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 194f.

³⁷⁵ Marx 2021, p. 508.

³⁷⁶ Marx 1973a, p. 32.

³⁷⁷ See Budde 1994. The *Communist Manifesto* stated in 1848: "The bourgeois phrases about family and education, about the intimate relationship between parents and children, become all the more disgusting as a result of large-scale industry, which tears apart all family ties for the proletariat and turns children into mere commodities and instruments of labour" (Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 478). However, this "use" was impossible for babies and small children, and it did not apply equally to middle-class children later on either.

What is also specific to the upbringing of children is that it affects beings who are completely dependent and emotionally "malleable". This has a lasting impact on their psychological structures: *before* any direct contact with production. Individual "humanisation" has always begun long before "work".

Taking this into account would have been extremely important for assessing possible changes in consciousness within the proletariat. For their ingrained psychological structures in turn influenced their approach to "work".

The more intensively they were trained to be submissive in childhood, the more willing they were likely to be to allow themselves to be bullied by bosses (and politicians) in the future. And: the harder it must have been for them to rebel against it.

So anyone who wanted people to defend themselves against unreasonable living conditions would have had to start in childhood, as Stirner suggested, and not just when training proletarians.³⁷⁸

Vulgar psychology

In his 1933 book *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, Wilhelm Reich dealt with "vulgar Marxism" – which he understood as the opposite of the teachings of Marx and Engels. According to Reich, vulgar Marxists "schematically separated social, mostly economic existence from existence itself,"³⁷⁹ claimed that ideology and consciousness were "determined *solely* and *directly* by economic existence,"³⁸⁰ and dismissed the study of drives, needs and mental processes as idealistic.

However, these accusations could also have been levelled at Marx and Engels in a milder form. They contradicted the idea that ideological processes were solely and directly determined by economics, albeit rarely. Although they viewed social existence in the context of "existence in general," they gave undue priority to economic existence. They did not deny the existence of psychological processes, but rather their real significance and momentum.

Reich continued: The vulgar Marxist is forced to "constantly engage in practical psychology, to speak of the needs of the masses, of revolutionary consciousness, of the will to strike, etc. The more he denies psychology, the more he himself practises metaphysical psychologism" or comforts "the masses [...] that they should trust him, that despite everything, progress is being made, that the revolution cannot be defeated, and so on".³⁸¹ Marx and Engels fell into this trap – which they themselves had set – on several occasions.

Even they could not consistently avoid referring to the mental state of those whom they otherwise portrayed primarily as mindless zombies. And suddenly these zombies awoke and did what Marx and Engels needed them to do to justify their predictions: resist, train for the revolution. The "character masks" fall – and no one knows why.

Perhaps this approach could be called "vulgar psychology": unsubstantiated or even unjustifiable assertions about psychological connections and states are used as explanations.

Engels provided another example of this in *The Origin of the Family*. There he summarises the development of the last millennia as follows: "Civilisation" has set "the basest instincts and passions of men in motion" and developed them "at the expense" of their other faculties. "Blunt greed" has been "the driving force of civilisation from its first day to the

³⁷⁸ It is now known that imprinting begins in the womb, where the effects of social existence are only very indirect (Janus 1993; Peglau/Janus 1994; Hüther/Krens 2010). On imprinting during pregnancy, birth and childhood: Reich 2018; Peglau 2019a; Neill 1992 and <https://www.summerhillsschool.co.uk/>.

³⁷⁹ Reich 2020, p. 24.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 24f.

present," "wealth and again wealth and for the third time wealth, wealth not of society, but of this single wretched individual, its only decisive goal."³⁸²

Although Engels naturally had no knowledge of the psychological state of humanity on the "first day" of civilisation, he believed he could judge its overall "soul" and diagnose it in this millennia-long constant. In doing so, he presented a crude view of humanity: dirty instincts as part of basic human nature, greed as the most important motive of society *as a whole* since then, i.e. probably also across the class boundaries that he and Marx otherwise emphasised.³⁸³ Suddenly, economic "laws" no longer played the main role, but rather the goals of individual, lumpish individuals – an equally astonishing and disconcerting revaluation of the role of the individual.

The *Origin of the Family* became one of Engels' most widely read works. In 1892, he was able to publish a fourth, expanded and revised edition.³⁸⁴ He did not change anything in the sentences quoted above.

Marx's best-known attempt to justify his historical optimism also suffers greatly from its exclusion of psychosocial reality.

Social upheaval without people

In 1859, in the preface to his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote:

"In the social production of their life, people enter into certain necessary relations, independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a certain stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a legal and political superstructure arises and to which certain forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general."³⁸⁵

He never went into this "superstructure" in depth.³⁸⁶
He continued:

"At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or, which is only a legal expression for this, with the property relations within which they had hitherto moved. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution."³⁸⁷

³⁸² Engels 1975b, p. 171.

³⁸³ Perhaps he was referring to Marx (1983b, p. 151), who wrote in 1857/58: "The pre-epoch of the development of modern industrial society is opened by the general greed for money, both of individuals and of states." The comparison with Engels' statement in 1844 that "the human heart" is "from the outset, immediately, in its egoism, unselfish and sacrificial" shows how much progress in understanding economics was accompanied by increasing deficits in understanding human beings.

³⁸⁴ Krader 1973, pp. 136, 148.

³⁸⁵ Marx 1971a, p. 8f.

³⁸⁶ This concept remained correspondingly unclear. See Heinrich 2021, pp. 202f.; Tomberg 1974, pp. 9–92; Labica/ Bensussan/ Haug 1989, pp. 1325–1330; Lotter/ Meiners/ Treptow 2016, pp. 60–63.

³⁸⁷ Marx 1971a, p. 9.

Material productive forces come into conflict with production relations: Once again, human beings do not appear here, or at most only indirectly, as a possible³⁸⁸ Bestand- teil "material productive forces". But even if human beings are meant to be included here, their role in this process is obviously not worth mentioning: Essentially, "the productive forces" fight it out with "the production relations" alone.

This would only be plausible insofar as semi-automatic machines, frozen into "character masks", would have no scope to rise above their material circumstances. People, as Marx essentially describes them in *Capital*, would not be capable of revolution.

Psychological conditions – Marx speaks of "ideological" or "forms of consciousness" – are therefore, in his view, only incidentally "revolutionised":

"With the change in the economic basis, the entire enormous superstructure undergoes a slower or faster transformation. When considering such upheavals, one must always distinguish between the material, scientifically verifiable upheaval in the economic conditions of production and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophical, in short, ideological forms in which people become aware of this conflict and fight it out."³⁸⁹

Fighting it out and becoming aware of it is not a (contributing) cause here, but only a consequence, a symptom: at some point, people simply notice what is going on and are forced to get involved. Marx emphasised that "such an epoch of upheaval" cannot be "judged" from the "consciousness" of those involved, but rather "this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between social productive forces and production relations".³⁹⁰

This was no longer as simplistic as he had portrayed it in 1846/47: "The hand mill gives us a society with feudal lords, the steam mill a society with industrial capitalists."³⁹¹ But once again, it was a case of obscuring the psychosocial processes and the actual actors.

Proceeding in this manner, Marx and Engels were unable to conclusively justify the maturation of what they declared to be the "lawful" socialist revolution or to plausibly anticipate its course.

Furthermore, if the relations of production were bound to undergo radical change anyway, why should the workers still organise themselves? Why did Marx and Engels spend so much time promoting this process and acting as advisors to workers' organisations³⁹² – would it not have been enough to sit back and watch the objective conditions undergo their lawful radical change?³⁹³

³⁸⁸ In the *Capital* volumes, "productive force" is never directly attributed to humans, but mostly to "labour": "The productive force of labour is determined by manifold circumstances, among others by the average degree of skill of the workers" (Marx 2021, p. 54). "The term 'productive forces' is rather obscure," criticises Lange (1955, p. 46). Nor does anything become clearer when one looks up all the places where the word appears in *Capital* or reads the corresponding collection of quotations in the *Marx-Engels Lexicon* (Lotter/Meiners/Treptow 2016, pp. 299–304). The expression "material productive forces" – which would probably only make sense as a counterpart to ideal productive forces – does not appear at all in *Capital*.

³⁸⁹ Marx 1971a, p. 9.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Marx 1972, p. 130. If one were to remain within the logic that new machines that massively change production cause revolutions, then the car or, at the latest, the computer should have brought about socialism.

³⁹² See Schieder 2018; Krätke 2020, p. 23.

³⁹³ Similarly: Steinfeld 2017, p. 48. The fact that Marx (2021, p. 16) believed that the "birth pangs" of the new society could possibly be "shortened and alleviated" is not sufficient for me as an explanation of this massive commitment. Harman (1986) reports that the "New Left" that emerged around 1950 referred, among other things, to the fact that Marx's three "historical writings" (*The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Civil War in France*) "contained no reference to a passive, fatalistic approach to historical change". But it is precisely this distinction that suggests that such references can indeed be found in Marx's other works. In *The Civil War*, Marx (1962b, p. 343) also

Half-hearted mitigations

In 1863, Marx conceded:

"Man himself is the basis of his material production, as of every other production he performs. All circumstances that affect man, the *subject* of production, modify [more or less] all his functions and activities, including his functions and activities as the creator of material wealth, of commodities. In this respect, it can indeed be proven that *all* human relationships and functions, however and in whatever form they may appear, influence material production and have a more or less decisive effect on it."³⁹⁴

Marx did not make the nature of this influence, or even whether it was compatible with economic "laws of nature", the subject of his research. In *Capital*, we find the following sentence: "The manner in which the immanent laws of capitalist production [...] come to the consciousness of the individual capitalist as driving motives is not to be considered here [...]"³⁹⁵ But this consideration did not take place later either.³⁹⁶

In 1884, in *The Origin of the Family*, Engels accorded greater importance to family structures and gender relations than he had previously done. However, he once again economised both. The "ultimately decisive factor in history" was "the production and reproduction of immediate life", i.e.

"the production of food, of objects of nourishment, clothing, housing and the tools necessary for this; on the other hand, the production of human beings themselves, the reproduction of the species. The social institutions under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live are determined by both types of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand, and of the family on the other."³⁹⁷

"Both types of production" – with this phrase, Engels lumped together the manufacture of objects and the birth and growth of human children. This probably made it easier for him to maintain his belief that his and Marx's teachings covered all the essential areas of life. Not in publications, but only in a few private letters, did Engels attempt to make a slight distinction in his later years. In 1890, he wrote that the "*ultimately* decisive factor in history" was "the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I ever claimed more than that. If someone now twists the to mean that the economic factor is the *only* determining factor, they are turning that sentence into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase."³⁹⁸

wrote that the working class still had "a whole series of historical processes to go through, [...] through which both people and circumstances will be completely transformed".

³⁹⁴ Marx 1956, p. 251.

³⁹⁵ Marx 2021, p. 335.

³⁹⁶ I therefore consider the following interpretation of Marx by Lawrence Krader (1973, p. 181) to be incorrect: "The capitalist is the subjectification of capital, or capital is the externalisation of the subjectivity of the capitalist." In any case, the second aspect is not to be found in *Capital*. The passage in which Marx (2021, p. 620) attempts to look deepest into the soul of "the capitalist" in Volume 1 of *Capital* reads: "With the development of the capitalist mode of production, of accumulation and of wealth, the capitalist ceases to be the mere incarnation of capital. He feels a 'human emotion' [...]. In the historical beginnings of the capitalist mode of production, and every capitalist parvenu goes through this historical stage individually, the drive for enrichment and avarice prevail as absolute passions." Here, then, capitalists seem to be only *original* personifications of capital. It remains unclear what causes the initial stage of avarice to arise and disappear, both socially and individually. Nor is it clear what an "absolute" passion is supposed to be.

³⁹⁷ Engels 1975b, p. 27.

³⁹⁸ Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 463.

It seems not to have occurred to Engels that an "economic moment" could only have arisen after thousands of years of "producing" human-like, then human beings – and not, conversely, that humans had been produced for thousands of years before they decided to reproduce, that this "reproduction" encompassed entirely uneconomic, emotional, sexual, partnership and family relationships, thereby also shaping the psyche and social being before any "production," does not seem to have occurred to Engels.³⁹⁹ This allowed him to remain loyal to his friend Karl, leave the primacy of economics untouched, and continue to dismiss processes "in people's minds" as secondary at best:

"The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of class struggle and its results – constitutions established by the victorious class after winning the battle, etc. – legal forms, and now even the reflexes [!] of all these real struggles in the minds of those involved, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into dogmatic systems, also exert their influence on the course of historical struggles and in many cases predominantly determine their form. It is an interaction of all these moments in which, through all the infinite number of coincidences [...], the economic movement ultimately prevails as a necessity. [...]"

We make our own history, but [...] under very specific circumstances and conditions. Among these, economic factors are ultimately decisive. But political factors, etc., and even the traditions that haunt people's minds, also play a role, albeit not a decisive one."⁴⁰⁰

The following assessment comes from another of his 1890s correspondences:⁴⁰¹

"The whole of history must be studied anew [...] before attempting to derive from it the corresponding political, private law, aesthetic, philosophical, religious, etc. views. Little has been done in this regard so far, because only a few have seriously set about doing so. [...] Instead, however, the phrase 'historical materialism' (anything can be turned into a phrase) serves only to enable many younger Germans to quickly and systematically construct their own relatively meagre historical knowledge – economic history is still in its infancy! – and then to feel very powerful."

A sobering summary of the contemporary state of research. As mentioned above, two years earlier Engels had greatly narrowed the scope of his thesis that history is shaped by class struggles.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Reich (1932, pp. 120–122), among others, pointed out that the pleasure aspect of sexuality is excluded from "reproduction" and thus demonstrated how much Engels' argument misses the mark in terms of "real life."

⁴⁰⁰ Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 463. The lawful coincidences were also at play here: "Secondly, however, history is such that the final result always emerges from the conflicts of many individual wills, each of which is shaped into what it is by a multitude of specific living conditions; there are therefore countless intersecting forces, an infinite group of parallelograms of forces, from which a resultant – the historical result – emerges, which itself can be regarded as the product of a power that, as a whole, acts *unconsciously* and without will. For what each individual wants is prevented by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one wanted. Thus, history to date has proceeded in the manner of a natural process, and is also essentially subject to the same laws of motion (ibid., p. 464). On the "laws of motion" referred to here: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialektische_Grundgesetze.

⁴⁰¹ Marx/Engels 1967b, p. 436f.

⁴⁰² Marx/Engels 1959, p. 462.

Notwithstanding all this, in 1892, in the introduction to the English translation *of his work Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, he stated that "historical materialism" was the

"view of the course of world history which sees the ultimate cause and decisive driving force of *all important historical events* in the economic development of society, in the changes in the mode of production and exchange, in the resulting division of society into different classes and *in the struggles of these classes* among themselves".⁴⁰³

In 1894, the year before his death, he reiterated: "Political, legal, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc. development is based on economic development"; it is a matter of "interaction based on economic necessity, which ultimately always prevails".⁴⁰⁴

Not in himself, and certainly not in Karl Marx, but in general, he still seems to have considered what "people say, imagine, picture" to be "fog formations in the brain"⁴⁰⁵.

⁴⁰³ Engels 1972, p. 298. Italics added by me.

⁴⁰⁴ Marx/Engels 1968, p. 206.

⁴⁰⁵ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 136.

Conclusion

Early on, Marx and Engels' views focused on seemingly independent, living things and processes, as well as helpless, zombie-like humans who were their appendages, puppets, slaves. Above all this sat "immanent" socio-economic laws, which concealed the enormous gaps in explanation: what happened according to the law required no further justification. In capitalism, the blood-soaked monster of capital acted as the enforcer of these laws.

"To be radical is to grasp things at their root. But for humans, the root is humans themselves."⁴⁰⁶ Marx could not have used this thesis, formulated in 1843/44, as the title for his later work. A more fitting title would have been: "The root for humans is economic laws." The place of God, driven out by the Enlightenment, had been taken by other, similarly powerful entities. Marx, who criticised bourgeois economists for "mystifying" economic relationships,⁴⁰⁷ created a new mystification. Exploring and proving the primacy of economics seems to have become a priority, almost an obsession, to which he egocentrically subordinated even marriage and family.⁴⁰⁸

I believe the question of whether Marx and Engels' teachings should be described as "economism" rather than "materialism" is a valid one.⁴⁰⁹ "If you only have a hammer as a tool, you see every problem as a nail" – this saying applies to some of their views. They reduced human beings to their premises and were therefore able to portray them in a simplified way: as a marginal phenomenon of what is really important. The "real individuals" they promised to consider in 1845, at the beginning of *The German Ideology*,⁴¹⁰ had already lost sight of them a few lines later; even then, they imagined the "establishment" of communism as "essentially economic".⁴¹¹

In 1857/58, Marx went so far as to say that "society does not consist of individuals"; it merely expresses "the sum of the relationships, the relations" "in which these individuals stand to one another"⁴¹² – interpersonal relationships without people, in other words: an irresolvable contradiction.⁴¹³ When Marx then dealt explicitly with capitalist or bourgeois "society" in *Capital*, he limited himself almost exclusively to economic issues;⁴¹⁴ his portrayal of people focused on the faceless duo of wage labourers and capitalists.

But 19th-century capitalist society included large, heterogeneous groups that did not participate in industrial production, whether because of their age (infants, the elderly), their social

⁴⁰⁶ Marx 1976, p. 385.

⁴⁰⁷ E.g. Marx 2021, p. 649.

⁴⁰⁸ Neffe (2017, p. 283) describes the "old pattern": Marx "makes himself scarce, [...] goes about his work", his wife Jenny "fights with the butcher and baker who want to collect their debts". Jörn Schütrumpf (2008, p. 43f.) attests that Marx was "self-obsessed throughout his life": thus, "emancipation remained theory".

⁴⁰⁹ Marx also used the pejorative term "economistic" to describe other authors (Marx/Engels 2021, p. 128; Haug 1985, p. 130). Haug (ibid., p. 129) admits that Marx's writings contain "formulations" that are "simply 'economistic' or can be read as such," but argues that Marx did not know any better and also expressed contrary views. He refers to a short passage from a letter written by Marx in 1877 (Marx/Engels 1987, pp. 108, 111f.) and to Engels' letters written in his old age. The "new left" (Harman 1986) also referred to the latter. However, views consistently expressed in major works cannot be offset against a few sentences in later private correspondence.

⁴¹⁰ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 8.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴¹² Marx 1983b, p. 189.

⁴¹³ Perhaps this should correspond to the "law" of the transformation of quantity into a new quality, which Engels also referred to: for example, water transforms into a new quality, steam, at 100 degrees Celsius. But this analogy does not work with human beings. Individuals in the "mass" are subject to various influences, including those that tend to make them more alike, and may conceal or suppress parts of their individuality. However, they can never truly lose it, never merge into a "collective soul" or a "large individual" (cf. Peglau 2022).

⁴¹⁴ See Marx 2021, e.g. pp. 12, 16, 28, 57ff., 104, 132, 156, 178, 206, 285, 325, 372, 431, 552, 672, 743. Incidentally, Marx (1963, p. 123) uses the word "capitalism" only once in the *Capital* volumes. "Capitalism" had been used to refer negatively to bourgeois class society since at least 1839, i.e. before Marx (Sandkühler 2021, p. 1194).

position (bourgeois children and wives), their living environment (the rural population), illness or unemployment, or because they were a minority of powerful politicians asserting their individual interests,⁴¹⁵ Marx and Engels devoted themselves to them only in passing, and so they did not understand capitalism as a social order.

As early as the 1970s, Marxist historian Edward Thompson pointed out that Marx was never able to fulfil his claim to represent capitalist society through his analysis of capital, partly because society consists of "numerous activities and relationships (of power, consciousness, sexual, cultural, of a normative nature)" that "are not the subject of political economy, but are excluded from it and for which it has no concepts".⁴¹⁶

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Marx and Engels – even in the passages I criticise in my text – had grasped more of this social reality than they themselves were aware of. Mass psychological effects, personality structures and disorders socialised in the interests of the ruling classes through education, religious and other indoctrination, and adapted to the social system, mutated in their portrayal into inevitable, economically enforced patterns of behaviour. The insight they thereby obstructed was that these patterns of behaviour, the effects of this indoctrination, and the underlying *psychosocial* reality could be understood and meaningfully changed.

Apart from the fact that Marx and Engels occasionally attributed to the proletariat what they hoped for from them in a "vulgar psychological" manner, the tenor of their teaching is: we are neither responsible for our essential living conditions nor do we have the opportunity to radically transform these conditions on our own.

They themselves, of course, fulfilled Marx's 1845 claim that what matters is to "*change*" the world.⁴¹⁷ They were committed throughout their lives to the changes they felt were necessary. And here, I believe, lies the decisive reason for the impact and lasting effect of their work. They recognised and proved in the economic sphere that exploitative systems – including capitalism – are degrading to human beings and must therefore be "overthrown". But they did not stop there. Through journalism and by initiating and inspiring socialist organisations, they helped to anchor these insights and reach those who were most affected.

In 1844, Marx wrote, "Theory becomes a material force as soon as it grasps the masses."⁴¹⁸ He probably hoped the same would happen to his own ideas. It was primarily Engels' writings that made this come true. In 1886, Engels announced that *Capital* was now "often called 'the Bible of the working class'".⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁵ Marx (2021, p. 502, pp. 660–674) described the unemployed as a "disposable industrial reserve army," distinguishing them from the "actual lumpenproletariat": "vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes" (ibid., p. 673). In 1852, his description of the "lumpenproletariat" was both more comprehensive and even more unsympathetic (Marx 1960a, pp. 160f.). Reading this, one sometimes gets the impression that he believed these people were themselves to blame for their misery – a very different view from that of Owen.

⁴¹⁶ Thompson 1980, p. 109, see also Solty 2024. Historian Paolo Tedesco (2023) states: "We cannot write the history of capitalism without [...] taking into account the intersection of various mechanisms of racist, sexist and nationalist oppression."

⁴¹⁷ Marx/Engels 1978, p. 7.

⁴¹⁸ Marx 1976a, p. 385.

⁴¹⁹ Marx 2021, p. 39. Despite his rejection of religion, Engels stated this entirely without irony. Interest in *Capital* developed rather slowly at first. Barbara Sichtermann (1995, p. 10f.) estimates that Marx's "works served until the end to 'self-understanding' among a narrow stratum of intellectual commentators and programmatists of the labour movement," that his work "neither served as a maxim for action for the labour leaders of Europe in its originally complex and demanding form [...], nor ever captured the masses." However, between 1946 and 1990, Dietz Verlag sold more than a million copies of the edited Volume 1. The fact that this high sales figure was closely linked to the existence of "real socialism" is supported by the fact that between 1990 and 2007 only "between 500 and 750" copies (presumably per year) were sold (Meisner 2013): "After reunification, Marx's works were practically unsellable on the shelves" (Supp 2009). After that, sales picked up again, reaching up to 2,000 copies per year (Meisner 2013). Nevertheless, what Thomas Steinfeld (2017, p. 10) writes is probably true: "There is no reason to assume that there are many people, especially younger ones, who have actually read *Capital*." For those who want to learn about the most important contents, a good introduction such as that by Michael Heinrich (2021) is recommended.

But even with the best will in the world, it is impossible to certify the mass appeal of the *Capital* volumes, which, even after multiple revisions, are still often highly complicated, verbose and obsessed with detail, with their countless nested sentences and repetitions.⁴²⁰

The one-sidedness and absolutism of Marx and Engels had consequences for the various forms of "Marxism" developed after Engels' death. Those of their followers who refrained from critical questioning – i.e. most of them – were able to lull themselves into deceptive "certainties" about the course of history, which in turn led to unrealistic political orientations: Our victory is inevitable. Or, in the version of SED General Secretary Erich Honecker from August 1989, three months before the fall of the Berlin Wall: "Neither ox nor donkey can stop socialism in its course."⁴²¹

Furthermore, it was possible to convince oneself that in-depth research into the actual state of consciousness of the working class or even into the overall psychosocial constitution of the population was unnecessary: the "classics" had already settled this conclusively.

But contrary to all statements, there was never a serious social science basis for the structure of the GDR state, for the establishment of "socialism" – now, having almost reached the end of my text, I am certain of this bitter realisation. The positive news is that what did not exist did not fail. It is worth making a new, *different* attempt.

Neither Marx nor Engels are to blame for the distorted reuse of their work, nor are they responsible for the authoritarian character structures among their followers. Anyone who ventures as courageously into new scientific and political territory as these two did is bound to make mistakes. It is just as inevitable that extensive intellectual output reflects the personality structure of its creators, including unconscious psychological problems. I outlined my view of the latter in relation to Marx and Engels at the beginning under the heading "repression".

Subsequent generations should have identified and corrected these shortcomings instead of codifying and exacerbating them. But, as shown, Marx and Engels provided a number of opportunities for the misuse of their ideas.

Of course, they also left behind much that could have served as a basis for closing gaps and integrating new ideas. I have mentioned some of this, such as the relativisation of the concept of "law" in *Capital* or passages from Engels' letters written in his old age.

In 1845, they noted that "circumstances make people just as much as people make circumstances."⁴²² In 1848, in the *Communist Manifesto*, they shared their expectation that "bourgeois society" would be replaced by "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."⁴²³

In 1875, Marx predicted that in a "higher phase of communist society" the motto would be: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ Sichtermann (1995, p. 15f.) assesses the comprehensibility of *Capital* in a positive way that I find only partially contradictory to my own assessment. He argues that it is "foolproof because of its meticulous, step-by-step development of the argument in the style of a successful mathematics textbook" and must be read "word for word". Conversely, it would be a "feat not to understand Marx, this fetishist of precision, who says everything three times – in varying formulations, of course – and then illustrates it with an epic miniature". On Marx's working methods: Kuckenburg 2023, pp. 12–17. On Engels' contribution to the difficult creation of the *Capital* volumes: Plumpe 2017. Engels wrote to Marx about the first edition: "How could you leave the *external* structure of the book as it is!" Some sections are "horribly tedious and [...] confusing," others apparently "written in a terrible hurry and with far too little processing of the material" (Marx/Engels 1965, pp. 324, 334).

⁴²¹ <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ddr/deutsche-einheit/mauerfall/erich-honecker-sozialismus-ochs-esel-100.html>

⁴²² Marx/Engels 2017, p. 46.

⁴²³ Marx/Engels 1972b, p. 482.

⁴²⁴ Marx 1973a, p. 21.

But Max Stirner, who attempted to identify the obstacles and goals of free development, was defamed by Marx and Engels. Those who, like Wilhelm Reich later on, set themselves the task of researching the interactions between people and circumstances more holistically, of finding out what exactly characterises a free individual, what conditions they need in order to be free, what – healthy! – needs motivate people, soon found themselves marginalised or persecuted by Marxists.⁴²⁵

And so what is still mostly referred to today as "Marxism" continues to drift along as a doctrine that is supposed to liberate "human beings" – but whose proponents for the most part do not even want to know what human beings are.

⁴²⁵ In 1933, Reich was expelled from communist organisations for allegedly holding counter-revolutionary views and was declared a non-person. Later, as a supposed Trotskyist, he found himself on one of the Stalinist lists, which often led to the murder of those named on them (Peglau 2017a, pp. 311–322).

PART 2:

**Alternative ways of thinking –
a suggestion for discussion**

It is impossible to reconstruct what would have happened if Marx and Engels had set a different course around 1844, if they had taken the psyche into account in an appropriate manner. But I would at least like to run through some of their assumptions and see what happens when I confront them with what I consider to be sufficiently reliable knowledge today.

As I said at the beginning, I assume that we are born with the potential to be social, lovable, capable of love and in need of love, sociable, inquisitive and creative beings. This is not wishful thinking on my part, but has now been scientifically proven many times over.⁴²⁶

Perhaps others will pick up my threads and spin them further, in their own way, individually and self-confidently, in the spirit of Max Stirner and Kant's motto: "Have the courage to use *your own* understanding!"

Another answer to the "fundamental question of philosophy"⁴²⁷

In 1859, in the preface to his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx distanced himself from idealistic philosophy: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."⁴²⁸ Engels later evaluated this as an answer to the "fundamental question of philosophy".⁴²⁹ This answer, often reduced to "Being determines consciousness,"⁴³⁰ became widely known.

In Marx's view, "consciousness" obviously meant all mental activity. It was left to Sigmund Freud, who first came to public attention with his psychoanalysis around 1900, to explicitly distinguish the unconscious from consciousness and to attribute its own laws to it. However, Marx and Engels also accepted that there is an unconscious realm in the life of the soul. Even before 1859, they used the term "unconscious" several times.⁴³¹

In this respect, Marx's statement should be completed, at least from today's perspective: "It is not the consciousness and unconsciousness of human beings that determines their being, but, conversely, their social being that determines their consciousness and unconsciousness."

Freud then went on to elaborate that the unconscious consists not least of misperceptions and misinterpretations ("neuroses"), which cause "irrational" ways of thinking and acting. It was already common knowledge that people often behave irrationally. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels did not include this in their thinking; for them, everything appears "logical" and rational.

If I summarise consciousness and the unconscious, including neuroses and irrationality, as the "psyche", the sentence reads: "It is not the psyche of human beings that determines their being, but rather their social being that determines their psyche."⁴³²

⁴²⁶ See, for example, Hüther 2003; Solms/Turnbull 2004, pp. 138ff., 148; Tomasello 2010; Klein 2011; Bauer 2011; Bregman 2020.

⁴²⁷ Further developed from Peglau 2024a.

⁴²⁸ Marx 1971a, p. 9.

⁴²⁹ "The fundamental question of all philosophy, especially modern philosophy, is the relationship between thinking and being" (Engels 1975a, p. 274). Here, too, the conceptual ambiguity is striking: "thinking" – Engels writes "feeling" shortly afterwards – and "consciousness" are equated.

⁴³⁰ Otto Finger (1977), for example, used this as the title for a chapter in his book *On Historical Materialism and Contemporary Tendencies to Distort It*.

⁴³¹ Among other places, in 1844 in *The Holy Family*: "Hegel's conception of history presupposes an *abstract* or *absolute spirit* that develops in such a way that humanity is merely a *mass* that carries it unconsciously or consciously" (Marx/Engels 1972a, p. 89). In 1857, in the draft of an introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1971b, p. 639) wrote about a "still unconsciously hypocritical form".

⁴³² In 1845, Marx and Engels (2017, p. 135) had noted: "Consciousness can never be anything other than conscious being." Taken as a yardstick, Marx's statement is tautological: "Being determines being." However, when the individual psyche,

However, this negates the interactions that Marx and Engels occasionally mentioned. If I include them, the sentence changes further: "People's psyche is determined far more by their social being than social being is determined by the psyche."

However, I cannot agree with this weighting. Instead, the following formulation corresponds to our limited knowledge: "The psyche of human beings is in constant interaction with social being." It is impossible to determine which of these has priority: how could this be established, how could the necessary "measurement" be objectified? Whether human "consciousness" or "social being" existed first hundreds of thousands of years ago is even more difficult to determine: it is a chicken-and-egg question that is lost in the mists of prehistory.

Does the proposed reformulation have any practical value?

Yes. Anyone who believes that social being determines the mental processes in individual human beings must focus on changing *society*; the psyche would supposedly follow. This was how it was handled in "real socialism" – with well-known (lack of) success: in 1990, the "consciousness" of most GDR citizens was still well aligned with the capitalist FRG.

Those who assume that these components are mutually dependent come to different conclusions.

In his 1976 book *To Have or To Be?*, Erich Fromm wrote:

"I refer to the result of the interaction between individual psychological structure and socio-economic structure as social character. The socio-economic structure of a society shapes the social character of its members in such a way that they want to do what they are supposed to do. At the same time, social character influences the socio-economic structure of society [...]." ⁴³³

As early as 1934, Wilhelm Reich noted in *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*:

"If one tries to change the [psychological] structure of people alone, society resists. If one tries to change society alone, people resist. This shows that neither can be changed on its own." ⁴³⁴

Such views are not only much closer to reality, they also offer more promising approaches for shaping and "revolutionising" social conditions.

subject to its own laws, is contrasted with the "being" of society, the two sides are so different that it is worth distinguishing between them.

⁴³³ Fromm 1989d, p. 364.

⁴³⁴ Reich 2020, p. 195. Without believing that Marx (1969, p. 6) means the same thing here, I would like to point out the similar-sounding sentence from the Feuerbach Theses: "The coincidence of changing circumstances and human activity or self-change can only be understood as *revolutionary practice* and rationally understood."

A different view of human development

Economics does not "develop" – it is developed: by people. People have motives for doing so. There is no objective compulsion for economic development. Where would it come from, what non-human power would exert it? If it existed, how could one explain that some hunter-gatherer societies have existed for thousands of years or still exist today?⁴³⁵

Since humans are usually born mentally healthy and therefore prosocial, they would – if they remained so healthy – create a society that suits them, i.e. one that is also healthy. This is incompatible with Marx and Engels' assumption that oppressive social orders *had* to arise and that capitalism was also a (natural) necessity: mentally healthy people would not establish a capitalist system at any point in time. Why would they harm themselves?

At some point in human development, conditions apparently arose that gave a few people the opportunity to gain power over many. But the fact that the few actually took advantage of this opportunity and the majority did not prevent it indicates that authoritarian disorders were already widespread.

How these disorders originally came about remains a mystery. It is worth considering the idea that they were the result of catastrophic natural events that caused prolonged hardship, hunger, powerless helplessness, despair, pent-up anger, and blockages of both empathy and the capacity for love. A hierarchical order may have formed in the struggle for scarce resources.⁴³⁶ Once the associated authoritarian-destructive psychological and then social structures were in place, they could be imposed on later generations through education and on other peoples through wars.⁴³⁷ For those who now stood at the top of these hierarchies, the preservation and expansion of power and possessions apparently became the decisive driving force. But these are also neurotic motives that do not explain themselves.

If this had indeed been the case, it would be an example of how being can shape the human psyche. In this case, however, being would not be social or economic, but ecological. And it would first have changed individuals, who then gradually created a new type of social constellation – which in turn had an effect on the individuals.

It has been proven that hierarchical constellations did not arise everywhere, certainly not at the same time, nor were they maintained everywhere. In their book *Anfänge* (english original: *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*),⁴³⁸ David Graeber and David Wengrow provide a detailed account of different social systems over the last millennia. What they document in terms of findings from anthropology, archaeology and historical science cannot be reconciled with Marx and Engels' assumption of humanity's economic progress. It certainly does not fit into the sequence of stages canonised under Stalin: primitive society – slave society – feudalism – capitalism – socialism.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁵ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%A4ger_und_Sammler; cf. Scott 2019; Ryan/ Jetha 2016, pp. 177–244; Graeber/ Wengrow 2021, pp. 473–476. Marx (2021, p. 379) also reflected on the "secret of immutability" of "self-sufficient communities," arriving at conclusions that changed over the years (Kuckenburg 2023, p. 41).

⁴³⁶ Marx (1960b, p. 129) may have had similar connections in mind when he assumed that the despotism of the "Asian mode of production" was largely due to water scarcity (cf. Kuckenburg 2023, pp. 21–58).

⁴³⁷ Braumann/ Peglau 1991 (cf. <https://historiablogweb.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/die-saharasia-these-oder-der-untergang-des-paradies/>).

⁴³⁸ Graeber/ Wengrow 2022.

⁴³⁹ Kuckenburg 2022, p. 27; Geiss 1974. Marx and Engels never described it in such strict chronological terms. In 1859, Marx (1971a, p. 9) wrote about "Asian, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production". He later replaced the term "Asian", which he used very imprecisely, "with the term 'archaic formation'" (Wimmer 2019, p. 14, footnote 14) or with "natural communism" (Weissgerber, quoted in Kuckenburg 2023, p. 57). Stalin then prohibited any study of the "Asian" mode of production, which bore striking similarities to the system he had established (Kuckenburg 2023, p. 123f.).

The philosopher Eike Gebhardt summarises the approach taken by *The Dawn of Everything* as follows: The authors wanted to

"break down the entire narrative of social evolution: they consider the supposedly universal shift around 9,000 BC from primitive hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural civilisations, with the corresponding sudden primacy of private property and the administration and social hierarchy that became necessary as a result, to be anything but natural, let alone inevitable."⁴⁴⁰ [...]

Graeber and Wengrow do not offer an alternative logic of development; on the contrary, they argue that such a uniform logic of stages or even progress has never existed anywhere. People have always and everywhere experimented with all kinds of subsistence forms, and what is more, they have consciously compared and weighed up their advantages and disadvantages, often practising several forms – cattle breeding, hunting, cultivation, trade – at the same time, sometimes abandoning one or the other for centuries and later taking it up again."⁴⁴¹

David Wengrow and David Graeber, who died in 2020, were committed to anarchist thinking. This is probably one of the reasons why they tried to explain this diversity by saying that people simply do not want to commit themselves, but always like to try out different models, as if out of a playful instinct.⁴⁴²

I consider this to be absurd. It would mean that members of a society could get together and decide, for example: "We've lived well long enough now, let's try fascism next year – we haven't had that yet." Graeber and Wengrow also suffer from the lack of a developed view of human nature. They can neither explain the emergence of oppressive, hostile social structures nor their at least temporary and regional overcoming.

⁴⁴⁰ Scott (2019), whom Graeber and Wengrow also refer to, argues similarly here.

⁴⁴¹ Gebhardt 2022. For *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, see also: Ongaro 2022; <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/praehistorie-als-geschichte-der-gegenwart-ein-gespraech-ueber-anfaenge-von-david-graeber-und-david-wengrow-2/>; <https://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/david-graeber-david-wengrow/anfaenge.html>.

⁴⁴² Graeber/ Wengrow 2022, p. 161f. (German version) and in many other places in the book.

Another idea of revolution

Our innate prosocial potential urges us to develop. This means that we suffer when it cannot develop. We not only feel what we need, what is good for us, but also what causes us pain or fear, what harms us. Oppression always harms.

It is therefore only necessary to "turn" adults into revolutionaries if their healthy inner standards were spoiled during childhood. Conversely, helping children to remain in touch with these standards preserves the crucial prerequisite for them to later consciously suffer under an alienating system such as capitalism⁴⁴³ and to commit themselves to a more humane order.

Reich called the innate ability to feel appropriately and act accordingly acting appropriately as the "biological core".⁴⁴⁴ Since this core can be buried by education and "socialisation" but never destroyed, it can be uncovered again throughout our lives, and the younger we are, the easier it is. For this reason, Alexander Neill, Scottish educator and close friend of Reich, was able to say about children: "Freedom cures most ills."⁴⁴⁵ Adults need more time and help to achieve this – which they can obtain in particular through therapy that uncovers problems and incorporates life history, consciousness, the unconscious, feelings and the body. Recognising, working through, alleviating or healing one's own neuroses is revolutionary and makes us revolutionary again: more capable of constructive upheavals, both privately and socially. And it creates better conditions for accompanying children into life in a loving, non-authoritarian way.

But actively striving for good and equal partnerships and fulfilling sexuality, denouncing life-threatening, war-glorifying norms in schools, workplaces, the media, churches, politics and government, both privately and publicly, and seeking out like-minded people with whom to resist these norms – all these are ways of promoting humane conditions.

If adults worked on their disorders and protected children from developing them in the first place, significant positive changes would likely become apparent in the next generation at the latest: healthier people build a healthier society. The necessary economic "upheaval" must be accompanied by a *psychosocial revolution*.⁴⁴⁶ In contrast to economic upheaval, everyone can start tonight: with themselves.

Although the capitalist social system sets limits, much is possible within these limits – and the limits can be shifted. The development of the Federal Republic of Germany has also proven this. In the West German state of the 1970s and 1980s, democratic traits were not yet so massively suppressed as they are today, and life-affirming elements were more pronounced, as evidenced not only by an effective peace movement but also by the popularity of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, non-violent birth and non-authoritarian education.⁴⁴⁷ I believe that Capitalism in the Federal Republic of Germany at that time was more humane than "real socialism" under Stalin or Mao Tse Tung. This underlines once again that the abolition of capitalist production relations is not yet the solution.

⁴⁴³ There is also no agreement on what "capitalism" is (Sandkühler 2021, pp. 1192–1212). I use "capitalism" as a synonym for a system in which the means of production, businesses and industries are so heavily privately owned, and wealth and political power are so concentrated in the hands of individual entrepreneurs, that society is largely dominated by them – a situation that bourgeois pseudo-democracy does nothing to change (cf. Mausfeld 2018).

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Peglau 2017b, pp. 48, 63, 108f.

⁴⁴⁵ Neill 1992, p. 55. See: <https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/alexander-neills-summerhill-projekt-hoerbuch-kostenlos-herunterladen-und-anhoeren/>

⁴⁴⁶ For details, see Peglau 2017b, pp. 53–120. My thoughts on this are based on the concept of a "therapeutic culture" introduced by psychotherapist Hans-Joachim Maaz in 1989 during the period of transition in the GDR (Peglau/Maaz 1990).

⁴⁴⁷ The fact that there was a competitor in the form of the GDR, against which one wanted to present oneself as superior in these matters, also played an important role.

Marx and Engels explained in 1845: "Communism is not for us a *state* to be achieved, an *ideal* to which reality must conform. We call communism the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things."⁴⁴⁸ Since the "present state of things" was and is not purely economic, but always had and has various aspects, it *can* and *must* be "abolished" in various ways. Not least through meaningful changes in the psychosocial sphere.

If such changes succeed, the chances of a *peaceful* transition to a humane order increase.

"The greater the mass base of the revolutionary movement, the less violence is necessary, and the more the masses' fear of revolution disappears," Reich wrote in 1934.⁴⁴⁹ When not only the majority of the oppressed population – beyond workers – realise that urgent changes are needed, but even leaders and members of the power apparatus slowly dawn on the fact that things cannot go on like this, the hope for *bloodless* "upheavals" increases.

Objectively speaking, it is not only the oppressed who live in inhumane conditions, but also the oppressors: exploiting people, dumbing them down, being responsible for mass misery, rapid environmental destruction and wars, for hundreds of thousands of deaths, is anything but desirable; it amounts to a completely wasted life, regardless of whether the perpetrators realise it or not. Who would want to trade places with them?

But they can only accomplish their deeds because they are sufficiently supported by their subjects – even if only by paying taxes that are used, for example, to finance arms exports.

The state structures and the authoritarian elements instilled in us make us, consciously or unconsciously, accomplices of those in power, jointly responsible.⁴⁵⁰

It is therefore in *all* our interests to create humane conditions.

⁴⁴⁸ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 37.

⁴⁴⁹ Reich 1934, p. 56. See also Peglau 2024c.

⁴⁵⁰ For details, see Peglau 2017b, pp. 87–115.

A different conception of the goal

Marx and Engels developed an indispensable analysis of capitalist economics and related factors, some of which is still valid today. They provide a wealth of information about what needs to be overcome and abolished – but little about what should replace it.⁴⁵¹

In May 1893, Engels was asked by a journalist from the newspaper *Le Figaro*: "And what is your, the German socialists', ultimate goal?" Engels looked at him for a few moments, then replied:

"But we have no final goal. We [...] have no intention of dictating definitive laws to humanity. Preconceived opinions regarding the organisation of future society in detail? You will find no trace of that among us. We will be satisfied once we have placed the means of production in the hands of society as a whole [...]."⁴⁵²

But was "society as a whole" ready to deal appropriately with what Engels considered to be the decisive means of power and organisation? Not at all – and the social catastrophes of the 20th century did not have to prove this.

Engels himself, beginning with his work *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, had shown how inhumanely large sections of the population lived. Did he seriously believe that this suffering, which usually lasted a lifetime, all the oppression and stultification, would not have a lasting effect on people? Should those who had been deformed for decades by their "material existence", whose consciousness had internalised "the ideas of the ruling classes", be enlightened by the possession of the means of production, shed their authoritarian character structures, and suddenly be able to act independently and self-confidently?

He probably believed so. Similar to how, after 1945, leading officials in the "real socialism" of the GDR believed that expropriating the capitalists, "denazification" and "anti-fascist democratic reorganisation" would make the "masses" sufficiently revolutionary. But the patriarchal-authoritarian, life-denying norms and values that had been created over generations, deeply rooted in psychological structures and exacerbated by fascism, thwarted their superficially naive calculations.

The newly emerging positions of power were predominantly held by more or less dogmatic officials and bureaucrats who, in Stalin's Soviet Union, were also inhumane and hostile to life. And the respective populations, fearful of authority as they had been brought up to be, were for the most part happy to continue being ruled.

The same thing happened in the GDR in 1990. The "leading role of the party" was replaced by the leading role of corporate bosses instead of a better form of socialism. A backward roll into capitalism, but thank God: subordination was saved!

Of course, there were no concepts for a better socialism in the comprehensive sense. These could only have been developed on the basis of an appropriate critique of Marx and would have had to give due recognition to psychosocial factors.

⁴⁵¹ This is demonstrated, certainly unwittingly, by Peter Hudis (2022), among others. He searched for Marx and Engels' thoughts on the "post-capitalist society," but can only refer to a few, partly speculative, detailed economic statements. The fantasies that Marx and Engels shared in *The German Ideology* are also half-baked. While in class society "everyone has a specific, exclusive sphere of activity" from which they cannot escape – they are hunters, fishermen, shepherds or critical critics – must remain so if he does not want to lose the means of life," in "communist society [...] he can train in any branch he likes," decide "to do this today, that tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon. In the evening, he can raise cattle and criticise after dinner, as I feel like doing, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" (Marx/Engels 2017, pp. 34, 37). Brodbeck (2018, p. 5) has rightly pointed out that more complicated tasks than fishing can hardly be adequately accomplished in this way.

⁴⁵² Engels 1977c, p. 542.

But in "real socialism," it had almost completely disappeared from public consciousness that – even for the young Marx – the necessary economic changes were only a *means to an end*, namely the end of building an order in which people were no longer humiliated, enslaved, isolated and despised, but could develop their individual abilities and healthy needs. This means increasingly became the focus, ultimately almost an end in itself.

Marx and Engels had noted in *The German Ideology*: "Life [...] consists above all of eating and drinking, housing, clothing and a few other things."⁴⁵³ Given the context, it is highly unlikely that they meant something psychological by "a few other things". In 1989, the GDR had sufficient supplies of the items they listed and, unlike in the FRG, at prices that everyone could afford. However, as soon became apparent, the fact that economic plans were mostly fulfilled did not result in the majority of the population feeling that their needs were being met. The end of private appropriation of surplus value did not create a social order that the majority felt was indispensable.

Nevertheless, even today, many who call themselves Marxists do not use the well-being of the population or their justified satisfaction with their lives as the decisive criterion for assessing a state, but rather the extent to which the means of production are in the hands of capitalists ("capital").

If one follows this line of thought to its logical conclusion, it is clear that today's China cannot be considered socialist – even though life expectancy, living standards, gender equality, legal certainty, healthcare, environmental conditions and personal satisfaction have improved dramatically in recent decades, and approval ratings for the state and government have reached levels that today's "Western" leaders can only dream of.⁴⁵⁴

Conversely, one would then have to say that even during the worst period of Stalinist mass murder in the Soviet Union, socialism prevailed. I consider this to be a perverse idea. In any case, socialist and humane would be completely different concepts in this context.

An obsession with economics also hinders or prevents us from finding our bearings in the current global political confrontation. Those who focus solely on production relations must tell themselves (or *can* conveniently tell themselves): "Capitalist states are active on all sides, there is no actor that is better or worse, I will remain a neutral 'left-wing' observer, maintaining a sovereign 'equidistance'." Those who detach themselves from this will find criteria for positioning themselves here.

So if the core issue is not production relations, but rather enabling people to live good, fulfilling, meaningful and, ideally, often happy lives, economics can only be an auxiliary science on the path to achieving this. And a "view of the course of world history" that sees the cause of "all important historical events [...] in the economic development of society"⁴⁵⁵ can only be one contribution among others that is worthy of consideration but also open to criticism because of its one-sidedness.

Approaching a humane order is possible and necessary in various ways. Economic upheavals are an essential part of this. However, this goal cannot be achieved through purely economic changes. It certainly cannot be *defined* in economic terms.

For this definition, we need answers to questions that are primarily *psychological* in nature: What is a "good" life, what makes a person happy, what do we need to be truly satisfied, what exactly is "humane"?

⁴⁵³ Marx/Engels 2017, p. 26.

⁴⁵⁴ See Elsner 2020, 2024; Peglau 2021.

⁴⁵⁵ Engels 1972, p. 298.

Only to the extent that we develop a realistic, comprehensive, holistic view of humanity – one that takes into account psychosocial contexts as well as biological conditions and ecological dependencies – can we truly assess what a social order that suits us should look like.

The clearer we have such a goal in mind, the easier it will be for us to start running again.

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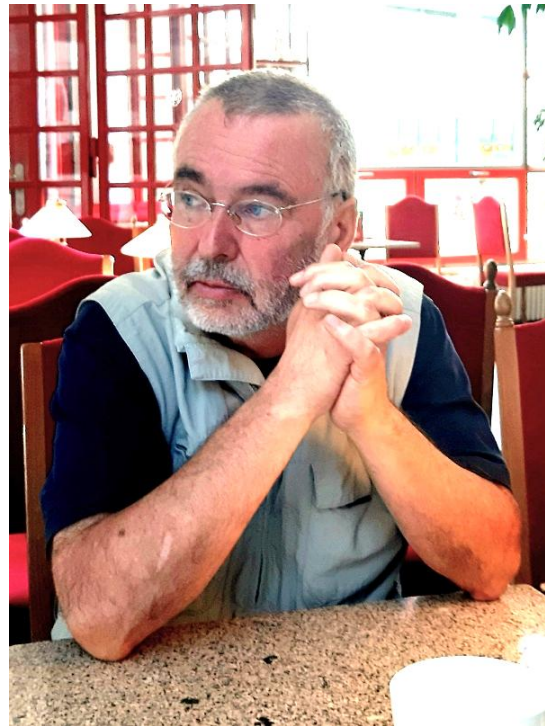
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Andreas Peglau, born in Berlin/GDR in 1957, Dr. rer. medic., qualified psychologist, psychological psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, studied clinical psychology at Humboldt University from 1976 to 1981 and worked as an editor at the GDR radio station Jugendradio DT 64 from 1985 to 1991, where his responsibilities included life coaching programmes. In 1990, he founded the *Gemeinschaft zur Förderung der Psychoanalyse e.V.* In 2013, he received his doctorate from the Institute for Medical History at Berlin's Charité hospital. In the same year, his book *Unpolitische Wissenschaft? Wilhelm Reich und die Psychoanalyse im Nationalsozialismus* (*Unpolitical Science? Wilhelm Reich and Psychoanalysis under National Socialism*). In 2020, he published the original text of Reich's 1933 book *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*) with Psychosozial-Verlag Gießen. He has published numerous articles on topics related to psychosocial and psychoanalytical history; see also <http://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/>. He is living in Vorpommern since 2022.



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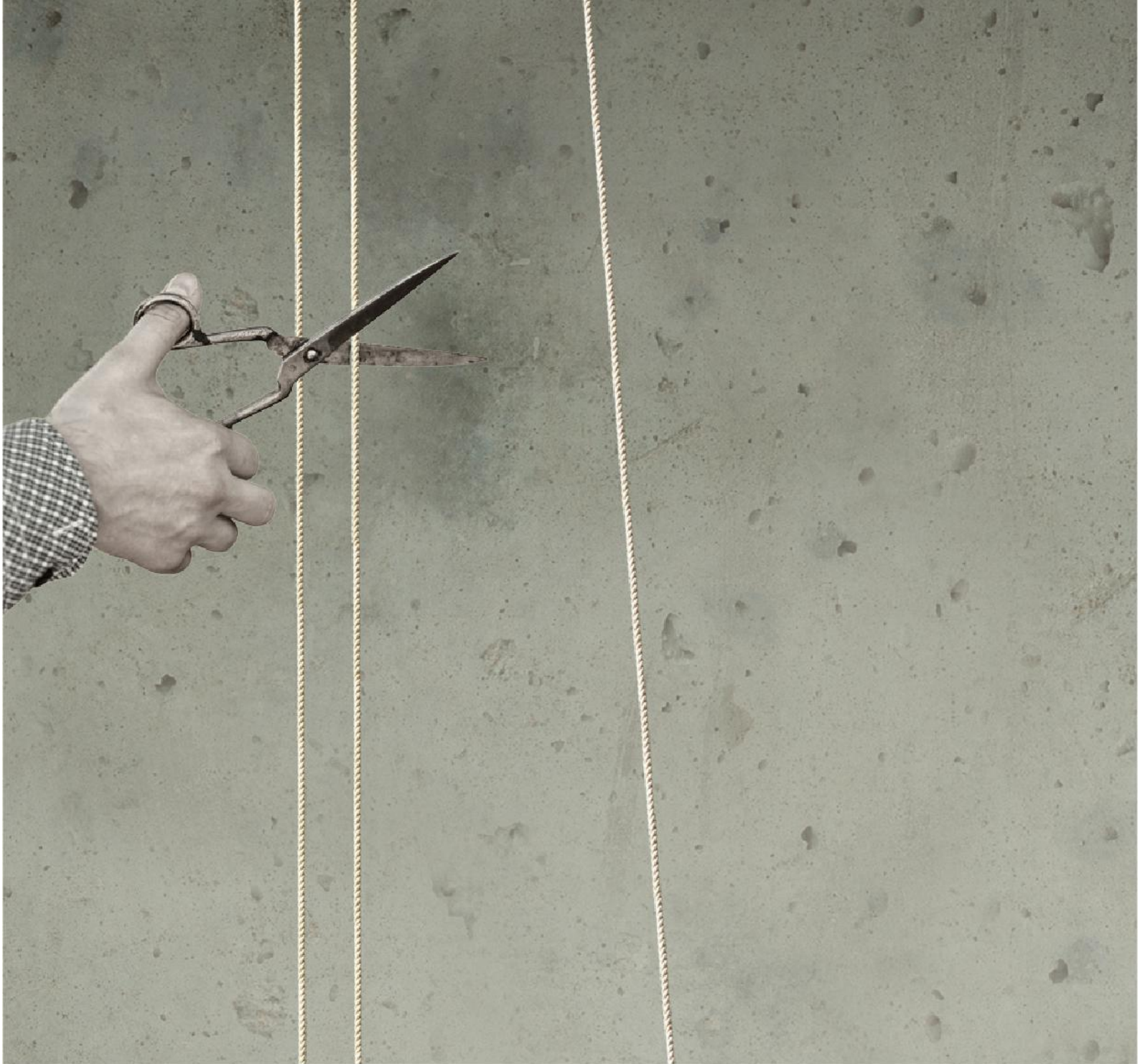
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DeepL-translation of *Andreas Peglau* (2024): *Menschen als Marionetten? Wie Marx und Engels die reale Psyche in ihrer Lehre verdrängten* (<https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/menschen-als-marionetten-wie-marx-und-engels-die-reale-psyche-in-ihre-lehre-verdraengten/>).

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Im Zentrum der Anschauungen von Marx und Engels stehen scheinbar eigenständig agierende Dinge und Prozesse sowie – als deren Marionetten – hilflose Menschen. Über all dem thronen sozialökonomische „Gesetze“, welche die enormen Erklärungslücken verdecken. Menschen, wie Marx und Engels sie beschreiben, wären nicht fähig zu Revolutionen.

Andreas Peglau