The following excerpts from Hannah Arendt’s manuscripts on Karl Marx are published here for the first time. When Arendt refers to the present—for instance, when she says “now”—it is important to be aware that she refers to the early 1950s, the period during which the excerpts were composed. Arendt always wrote in great haste, but never more so than here. Consequently, these writings have required rather extensive “Englishing,” a process to which Arendt always submitted whatever she wrote in English prior to publication. In this case the “Englishing” has consisted primarily in breaking overly long sentences and paragraphs into several shorter ones, and in correcting what are clearly errors in English grammar and syntax. But at the same time every effort has been made to retain the raw, racing quality of Arendt’s thought, as well as the immediacy of her voice, both of which are nowhere more abundantly manifest than in her writings on Marx. The reader is referred to the first part of the preceding Introduction for more detailed information. J. K.

The Broken Thread of Tradition

It has never been easy to think and write about Karl Marx. His impact on the already existing parties of the workers, who had only recently won full legal equality and political franchise in the nation states, was immediate and far-reaching. His neglect, moreover, by the academic, scholarly world hardly lasted more than two decades after his death, and since then his influence has


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risen, spreading from strict Marxism, which already by the 1920s had become somewhat outmoded, to the entire field of social and historical sciences. More recently, his influence has been frequently denied. That is not, however, because Marx’s thought and the methods he introduced have been abandoned, but rather because they have become so axiomatic that their origin is no longer remembered. The difficulties that previously prevailed in dealing with Marx, however, were of an academic nature compared with the difficulties that confront us now. To a certain extent they were similar to those that arose in the treatment of Nietzsche and, to a lesser extent, Kierkegaard: struggles pro and contra were so fierce, the misunderstandings that developed within them so tremendous, that it was difficult to say exactly what or who one was thinking and talking about. In the case of Marx, the difficulties were obviously even greater because they concerned politics: from the very beginning positions pro and contra fell into the conventional lines of party politics, so that to his partisans, whoever spoke for Marx was deemed “progressive,” and whoever spoke against him “reactionary.”

This situation changed for the worse when, with the rise of one Marxian party, Marxism became (or appeared to become) the ruling ideology of a great power. It now seemed that the discussion of Marx was bound up not only with party but also with power politics, and not only with domestic but also with world political concerns. And while the figure of Marx himself, now even more so than before, was dragged into the arena of politics, his influence on modern intellectuals rose to new heights: the chief fact for them, and not wrongly so, was that for the first time a thinker, rather than a practical statesman or politician, had inspired the policies of a great nation, thereby making the weight of thought felt in the entire realm of political activity. Since Marx’s idea of right government, outlined first as the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was to be followed by a classless and stateless society, had become the official aim of one country and of political movements throughout the world, then, certainly, Plato’s dream of sub-
jecting political action to the strict tenets of philosophic thought had become a reality. Marx attained, albeit posthumously, what Plato in vain had attempted at the court of Dionysios in Sicily. Marxism and its influence in the modern world became what it is today because of this twofold influence and representation, first by the political parties of the working classes, and, second, by the admiration of the intellectuals, not of Soviet Russia per se, but for the fact that Bolshevism is, or pretends to be, Marxist.

To be sure, Marxism in this sense has done as much to hide and obliterate the actual teachings of Marx as it has to propagate them. If we want to find out who Marx was, what he thought, and how he stands in the tradition of political thought, Marxism all too easily appears mainly as a nuisance—more so than, but not essentially different from, Hegelianism or any other “ism” based on the writings of a single author. Through Marxism Marx himself has been praised or blamed for many things of which he was entirely innocent; for instance, for decades he was highly esteemed, or deeply resented, as the “inventor of class struggle,” of which he was not only not the “inventor” (facts are not invented) but not even the discoverer. More recently, attempting to distance themselves from the name (though hardly the influence) of Marx, others have been busy proving how much he found in his avowed predecessors. This searching for influences (for instance, in the case of class struggle) even becomes a bit comical when one remembers that neither the economists of the nineteenth or eighteenth centuries nor the political philosophers of the seventeenth century were needed for a discovery of what was already present in Aristotle. Aristotle defined the substance of democratic government as rule by the poor and of oligarchic government as rule by the rich, and stressed this to the extent that he discarded the content of those already traditional terms, namely, rule by the many and rule by the few. He insisted that a government of the poor be called a democracy, and that a government of the rich be called an oligarchy, even if the rich should outnumber the poor. The political relevance of class struggle could
hardly be more emphatically stated than by basing two distinct forms of government on it. Nor can Marx be credited with having elevated this political and economic fact into the realm of history. For such elevation had been current ever since Hegel encountered Napoleon Bonaparte, seeing in him the “world spirit on horseback.”

But the challenge with which Marx confronts us today is much more serious than these academic quarrels over influences and priorities. The fact that one form of totalitarian domination uses, and apparently developed directly from, Marxism, is of course the most formidable charge ever raised against Marx. And that charge cannot be brushed off as easily as can charges of a similar nature—against Nietzsche, Hegel, Luther, or Plato, all of whom, and many more, have at one time or another been accused of being the ancestors of Nazism. Although today it is so conveniently overlooked, the fact that the Nazi version of totalitarianism could develop along lines similar to that of the Soviet, yet nevertheless use an entirely different ideology, shows at least that Marx cannot very well stand accused of having brought forth the specifically totalitarian aspects of Bolshevik domination. It is also true that the interpretations to which his teachings were subjected, through Marxism as well as through Leninism, and the decisive transformation by Stalin of both Marxism and Leninism into a totalitarian ideology, can easily be demonstrated. Nevertheless it also remains a fact that there is a more direct connection between Marx and Bolshevism, as well as Marxist totalitarian movements in nontotalitarian countries, than between Nazism and any of its so-called predecessors.

It has become fashionable during the last few years to assume an unbroken line between Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, thereby accusing Marx of being the father of totalitarian domination. Very few of those who yield to this line of argument seem to be aware that to accuse Marx of totalitarianism amounts to accusing the Western tradition itself of necessarily ending in the monstrosity of this novel form of government. Whoever touches Marx
.touches the tradition of Western thought; thus the conservatism on which many of our new critics of Marx pride themselves is usually as great a self-misunderstanding as the revolutionary zeal of the ordinary Marxist. The few critics of Marx who are aware of the roots of Marx’s thought therefore have attempted to construe a special trend in the tradition, an occidental heresy that nowadays is sometimes called Gnosticism, in recollection of the oldest heresies of Catholic Christianity. Yet this attempt to limit the destructiveness of totalitarianism by the consequent interpretation that it has grown directly from such a trend in the Western tradition is doomed to failure. Marx’s thought cannot be limited to “immanentism,” as if everything could be set right again if only we would leave utopia to the next world and not assume that everything on earth can be measured and judged by earthly yardsticks. For Marx’s roots go far deeper in the tradition than even he himself knew. I think it can be shown that the line from Aristotle to Marx shows both fewer and far less decisive breaks than the line from Marx to Stalin.

The serious aspect of this situation, therefore, does not lie in the ease with which Marx can be slandered and his teachings, as well as his problems, misrepresented. The latter is of course bad enough, since, as we shall see, Marx was the first to discern certain problems arising from the Industrial Revolution, the distortion of which means at once the loss of an important source, and possibly help, in dealing with real predicaments that ever more urgently continue to confront us. But more serious than any of this is the fact that Marx, as distinguished from the true and not the imagined sources of the Nazi ideology of racism, clearly does belong to the tradition of Western political thought. As an ideology Marxism is doubtless the only link that binds the totalitarian form of government directly to that tradition; apart from it any attempt to deduce totalitarianism directly from a strand of occidental thought would lack even the semblance of plausibility.

A serious examination of Marx himself, as opposed to the cursory dismissal of his name and the often unconscious retention of
the consequences of his teaching, is therefore somehow dangerous in two respects: it cannot but question certain trends in the social sciences that are Marxist in all but name and the depth of Marx’s own thought; and it must necessarily examine the real questions and perplexities of our own tradition with which Marx himself dealt and struggled. The examination of Marx, in other words, cannot but be an examination of traditional thought insofar as it is applicable to the modern world, a world whose presence can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution on the one hand, and to the political revolutions of the eighteenth century on the other. The modern age presented modern man with two main problems, independent of all political events in the narrow sense of the word: the problems of labor and history. The significance of Marx’s thought lies neither in his economic theories nor in its revolutionary content, but in the stubbornness with which he clung to these two chief new perplexities.

One might argue that the thread of our tradition was broken, in the sense that our traditional political categories were never meant for such a situation, when, for the first time in our history, political equality was extended to the laboring classes. That Marx at least grasped this fact and felt that an emancipation of the laboring class was possible only in a radically changed world distinguishes his thought from that of utopian socialism, the chief defect of which was not (as Marx himself believed) that it was unscientific, but its assumption that the laboring class was an underprivileged group and that the fight for its liberation was a fight for social justice. That the older convictions of Christian charity should develop into fierce passions of social justice is understandable enough at a time when the means to put an end to certain forms of misery were so evidently present. Yet such passions were and are “outdated” in the sense that they had ceased to be applicable to any social group but rather only to individuals. What Marx understood was that labor itself had undergone a decisive change in the modern world: that it had not only become the source of all wealth, and consequently the origin of all social
values, but that all men, independent of class origin, were sooner or later destined to become laborers, and that those who could not be adjusted into this process of labor would be seen and judged by society as mere parasites. To put it another way: while others were concerned with this or that right of the laboring class, Marx already foresaw the time when, not this class, but the consciousness that corresponded to it, and to its importance for society as a whole, would decree that no one would have any rights, not even the right to stay alive, who was not a laborer. The result of this process of course has not been the elimination of all other occupations, but the reinterpretation of all human activities as laboring activities.

From the viewpoint of the history of ideas, one might argue with almost equal right that the thread of tradition was also broken the moment that History not only entered human thought but became its absolute. Indeed, this had happened not with Marx but with Hegel, whose entire philosophy is a philosophy of history, or rather, one that dissolved all previous philosophic as well as all other thought into history. After Hegel had historicized even logic, and after Darwin, through the idea of evolution, had historicized even nature, there seemed nothing left that could withstand the mighty onslaught of historical categories. The conclusion that Marx quite properly drew from this spiritual (geistliche) situation was his attempt to eliminate history altogether. For Hegel, thinking historically, the meaning of a story can emerge only when it has come to an end. End and truth have become identical; truth appears when everything is at its end, which is to say when and only when the end is near can we learn the truth. In other words, we pay for truth with the living impulse that imbues an era, although of course not necessarily with our own lives. The manifold modern versions of an antagonism between life and spirit, especially in their Nietzschean form, have their source in this historicization of all our spiritual categories, that is, in an antagonism between life and truth.
What Hegel states about philosophy in general, that “the owl of Minerva spreads her wings only with the falling of the dusk,” holds only for a philosophy of history, that is, it is true of history and corresponds to the view of historians. Hegel of course was encouraged to take this view because he thought that philosophy had really begun in Greece with Plato and Aristotle, who wrote when the polis and the glory of Greek history were at their end. Today we know that Plato and Aristotle were the culmination rather than the beginning of Greek philosophic thought, which had begun its flight when Greece had reached or nearly reached its climax. What remains true, however, is that Plato as well as Aristotle became the beginning of the occidental philosophic tradition, and that this beginning, as distinguished from the beginning of Greek philosophic thought, occurred when Greek political life was indeed approaching its end. The problem then arose of how man, if he is to live in a polis, can live outside of politics; this problem, in what sometimes seems a strange resemblance to our own times, quickly became the question of how it is possible to live without belonging to any polity, that is, in the state of apolity, or what we today would call statelessness.

One could say that the problem of labor indicates the political side, and the problem of history the spiritual side, of the perplexities that arose at the end of the eighteenth century and emerged fully in the middle of the nineteenth. Insofar as we still live with and in these perplexities, which meanwhile have become much sharper in fact while much less articulate in theoretical formulation, we are still Marx’s contemporaries. The enormous influence that Marx still exerts in almost all parts of the world seems to confirm this. Yet this is true only to the extent that we choose not to consider certain events of the twentieth century; that is, those events that ultimately led to the entirely novel form of government we know as totalitarian domination. The thread of our tradition, in the sense of a continuous history, broke only with the emergence of totalitarian institutions and policies that no longer could be comprehended through the categories of tradi-
tional thought. These unprecedented institutions and policies issued in crimes that cannot be judged by traditional moral standards, or punished within the existing legal framework of a civilization whose juridical cornerstone had been the command Thou shalt not kill.

The distinction between what can and what cannot be comprehended in terms of the tradition may appear unduly academic. Among the conspicuous reflections of the crisis of the present century—and one of the outstanding indications that it indeed involved nothing less than a breakdown of the tradition—has been the learned attempts by many scholars to date the origin of the crisis. With almost equal plausibility that origin has been seen in historical moments ranging between the fourth century before and the nineteenth century after Christ. Against all such theories, I propose to accept the rise of totalitarianism as a demonstrably new form of government, as an event that, at least politically, palpably concerns the lives of all of us, not only the thoughts of a relatively few individuals or the destinies of certain specific national or social groups. Only this event, with its concomitant change of all political conditions and relationships that previously existed on the earth, rendered irreparable and unhealable the various “breaks” that have been seen retrospectively in its wake. Totalitarianism as an event has made the break in our tradition an accomplished fact, and as an event it could never have been foreseen or forethought, much less predicted or “caused,” by any single man. So far are we from being able to deduce what actually happened from past spiritual or material “causes” that all such factors appear to be causes only in the light cast by the event, illuminating both itself and its past.

In this sense, then, we are no longer the contemporaries of Marx. And it is from this viewpoint that Marx acquires a new significance for us. He is the one great man of the past who not only was already concerned with predicaments that are still with us, but whose thought could also be used and misused by one of the forms of totalitarianism. Thus Marx seems to provide a reliable
link for us back into the tradition, because he himself was more firmly rooted in it (even when he thought he was rebelling against it, turning it upside down, or escaping from the priority of theoretical-interpretative analysis into historical-political action) than we can ever be again. For us totalitarianism necessarily has become the central event of our times and, consequently, the break in tradition a fait accompli. Because Marx concerned himself with the few new elementary facts for which the tradition itself did not provide a categorical framework, his success or failure therefore enables us to judge the success or failure of the tradition itself in regard to these facts, even before its moral, legal, theoretical, and practical standards, together with its political institutions and forms of organization, broke down spectacularly. That Marx still looms so large in our present world is indeed the measure of his greatness. That he could prove of use to totalitarianism (though certainly he can never be said to have been its "cause") is a sign of the actual relevance of his thought, even though at the same time it is also the measure of his ultimate failure. Marx lived in a changing world and his greatness was the precision with which he grasped the center of this change. We live in a world whose main feature is change, a world in which change itself has become a matter of course to such an extent that we are in danger of forgetting that which has changed altogether.

The first great challenge to tradition came when Hegel interpreted the world as subject to change in the sense of historical movement. Marx's own challenge to tradition—"The philosophers have only interpreted the world. . .the point, however, is to change it"—was one among many possible conclusions that might be derived from Hegel’s system. To us it sounds as though Marx were saying: The world the philosophers of the past have interpreted, and that the last of them understood in terms of a continuous, self-developing history, is in fact changing beyond recognition. Let us try to take control of this process and change the world in accordance with our tradition. By "tradition" Marx always understood the tradition of philosophy, to which the one
surviving class, representing humanity as a whole, would ultimately become the heir. Marx himself meant that the irresistible motion of history one day would stop, that further change would be ruled out when the world had undergone its last and decisive change. This side of Marx’s teaching is usually dismissed as its utopian element: the end in view of a classless society when history itself would come to a halt once its motor—class struggle—would have ceased. In fact it indicates that in some fundamental aspects Marx was more closely bound to the tradition than Hegel was. The revolutionary element in Marx’s teachings, therefore, is only superficially contained in his vision of an end brought about by actual revolution, the outcome of which, according to him, would have coincided rather curiously with the ideal of life associated with the Greek city-states. The really anti-traditional and unprecedented side of his thought is his glorification of labor, and his reinterpretation of the class—the working class—that philosophy since its beginning had always despised. Labor, the human activity of this class, was deemed so irrelevant that philosophy had not even bothered to interpret and understand it. In order to grasp the political importance of the emancipation of labor, and Marx’s corresponding dignification of labor as the most fundamental of all human activities, it may be well just to mention, at the beginning of these reflections, the distinction between labor and work that, although largely unarticulated, has been decisive for the whole tradition, and that, only recently, and partly because of Marx’s teachings, has become blurred.

Marx is the only thinker of the nineteenth century who took its central event, the emancipation of the working class, seriously in philosophic terms. Marx’s great influence today is still due to this one fact, which also, to a large extent, explains how his thought could become so useful for purposes of totalitarian domination. The Soviet Union, which from the moment of its foundation called itself a republic of workers and peasants, may have deprived its workers of all the rights they enjoy in the free world. Yet its ideology is primarily an ideology designed for laborers, and
labor, as distinguished from all other human activities, has remained its highest “value,” the only distinction it recognizes. In this respect it is, moreover, only the most radical version of our own society, which more and more tends also to become a society of laborers. On the other hand, the Soviet Union’s means of domination, unprecedented as they are in political history and unknown to political thought, have frequently (and not altogether wrongly) been called the means of a slave society. Although this term does not do justice to the nonutilitarian character of total domination, it does indicate the total character of the subjection itself. That such subjection is worsened when the utilitarian motive, which had been the chief guarantee of a slave’s life, no longer exists, is obvious. But then slavery, at least in Western society, never has been a form of government and therefore never, strictly speaking, has belonged in the political realm. Only those who were not slaves were able to take part in political life under normal, nontyrannical government. But even under tyranny the sphere of private life was left intact, which is to say that there was left a sort of freedom that no slave might enjoy.

But whether Marx, whose influence on politics was tremendous, was ever genuinely interested in politics as such may justly be doubted. The fact is that his interpretation, or rather, glorification of labor, while only following the course of events, in itself could not fail to introduce a complete reversal of all traditional political values. It was not the political emancipation of the working class, the equality for all that for the first time in history included menial workers, that was decisive, but rather the consequence that from now on labor as a human activity no longer belonged to the strictly private realm of life: it became a public political fact of the first order. By this I do not refer to the economic sphere of life; this sphere as a whole always was a matter of public concern. But this sphere is only to a very small extent the sphere of labor.

Labor is necessarily prior to any economy, which is to say that the organized attempt of men living together, handling and
securing both the needs and the luxuries of life, starts with and requires labor even when its economy has been developed to the highest degree. As the elementary activity necessary for the mere conservation of life, labor had always been thought of as a curse, in the sense that it made life hard, preventing it from ever becoming easy and thereby distinguishing it from the lives of the Olympian gods.\(^5\) That human life is not easy is only another way of saying that in its most elementary aspect it is subject to necessity, that it is not and never can become free from coercion, for coercion is first felt in the peculiarly all-overwhelming urges of our bodies. People who do nothing but cater to these elementary coercive needs were traditionally deemed unfree by definition—that is, they were considered unready to exercise the functions of free citizens. Therefore those who did this work for others in order to free them from fulfilling the necessities of life themselves were known as slaves.

In every civilization labor is the activity that enables the public realm to put at our disposal what we consume. Labor as the metabolism with nature is not primarily productive but consumptive, and its necessity would remain so even if no productivity, no addition to the common world, were ever associated with it. It is because of the connection of all laboring activity to the strictly biological needs of our bodies that it traditionally was deemed to belong to the lower, almost animal-like functions of human life, and as such considered a strictly private matter. Public political life began where this realm of the private ended, or in other words whenever those needs could be transcended into a common world, a world in-between men transcending the metabolism with nature of each of its individuals. Politics in the original Greek sense of the word began with the liberation from labor, and in spite of many variations remained the same in this respect for nearly 3,000 years; and this, as we know, was first made possible through the institution of slavery. Slavery therefore was not a part of Greek political life but the condition of politeúein, of all those activities that for the Greeks fulfilled the life of the citizen. As
such it was based on rule over slaves, but was itself not divided into ruling and being ruled; for the early Greeks ruling over slaves was a pre-political condition of politeúein, of being political.

This original form of politics underwent a decisive change in the period of decay of the Greek polis, a decay that coincided with that culmination of Greek philosophy, which was to become authoritative for all times up to our own. The suspicion and contempt of the philosophers concerned the activity of politeúein itself but not the basis on which it rested. In the stead of politeúein, which had been made possible by liberation from the necessities of biological life, came the ideal of philosophēn, the activity of philosophizing. From then on the distinction between ruling and being ruled invaded the realm of politics directly; and the rule over the necessities of life became the precondition, not of politics, but of philosophy, that is, ruling over whatever was materially needed to enable man to lead the higher, philosophic life took the place of politeúein. In both cases the earlier experience of an activity fulfilling the life of the citizen was all but lost to the tradition. The emancipation of labor, both as the glorification of the laboring activity and as the political equality of the working class, would not have been possible if the original meaning of politics—in which a political realm centered around labor would have been a contradiction in terms—had not been lost.

When Marx made labor the most important activity of man, he was saying, in terms of the tradition, that not freedom but compulsion is what makes man human. When he added that nobody could be free who rules over others he was saying, again in terms of the tradition, what Hegel, in the famous master-servant dialectic, had only less forcefully said before him: that no one can be free, neither those enslaved by necessity nor those enslaved by the necessity to rule. In this Marx not only appeared to contradict himself, insofar as he promised freedom for all at the same moment he denied it to all, but to reverse the very meaning of freedom, based as it had been on the freedom from
that compulsion we naturally and originally suffer under the human condition.

Equality for workers and the dignification of the laboring activity were of such tremendous and revolutionary importance because the occidental attitude to labor had been so closely connected with its attitude to life in the purely biological sense. And this sense was stressed even more forcefully than before in Marx's own definition of labor as man's metabolism with nature. The laborers were not only those who were ruled by the free in order not to be enslaved to the sheer necessities of life; they were, psychologically speaking, also those who stood accused of philopsychia, of love of life for life's own sake. Philopsychia in fact is what distinguished the slave from the free man. In ancient times the free man found his hero in Achilles, who exchanged a short life for the eternal fame of greatness; after the fourth century before Christ the free man became the philosopher who devoted his life to the θεόρην, to the "contemplation" of eternal truths, or, in the Middle Ages, to the salvation of his eternal soul. Insofar as the political realm was constituted by free men, labor was eliminated from it; and in all these instances, even those in which the value of political action was most limited, labor was viewed as an activity without any dignity in itself whatsoever.

The Modern Challenge to Tradition
(excerpts)

At the other end of this position and, as it must appear at first glance, in the most extreme opposition to it, stand three propositions that are the pillars on which Marx's whole theory and philosophy rest: first, Labor is the Creator of Man; second, Violence is the midwife of History (and, since history for Marx is past political action, this means that violence makes action efficient); and third, seemingly in contradiction to the other two, Nobody can be free who enslaves others. Each of these propositions expresses in
quintessential form one of the decisive events with which our own era began. There is first, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the full political emancipation of the working class, regardless of property and skill qualifications. Never before had any political organism sought to encompass all those who actually lived in it. If we were to translate this event into the language of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we would have to say that man—even in the state of nature and endowed with nothing but his working or laboring capacity—was accepted as a full citizen.

It is true that in European nation-states this all-encompassing principle was significantly qualified: only people born in a nation’s territory or descended from its nationals were recognized as citizens. But this qualification had nothing to do with the new revolutionary principle itself and was not, for instance, applicable in the United States, the only country where the Industrial Revolution was not hampered by the transformation of feudal states into classes and therefore where the emancipation of the working class could at once achieve its true character. The class system, so greatly overrated by Marx, who knew the Industrial Revolution only in its European version, is actually a feudal remnant whose curious transformations are swiftly liquidated wherever that revolution is permitted to run its full course. The political consequences of the emancipation of labor in America come very close to a realization of the social contract between all men that the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still thought to be either a prehistoric fact at the beginning of civilized society or a scientific figment necessary for the legitimacy of political authority.

The Industrial Revolution, with its unlimited demand for sheer labor force, resulted in the unheard of reinterpretation of labor as the most important quality of man. The emancipation of labor, in the double sense of emancipating the working class and dignifying the activity of laboring, indeed implied a new “social contract,” that is, a new fundamental relationship between men based on what the tradition would have despised as their lowest com-
mon denominator: ownership of labor force. Marx drew the consequences of this emancipation when he said that labor, the specifically human metabolism with nature, was the most elementary human distinction, that which intrinsically distinguished human from animal life.

Second, there was the tremendous fact of the French and American Revolutions. In these events violence had brought about not some haphazard slaughter whose meaning reveals itself only to later generations, or is comprehensible only from the viewpoint of the interested parties, but an entirely new body politic. In its outlines, and in the case of the United States in many details, this body politic had been drawn up by the eighteenth-century philosophes and ideologues, that is, by those who perceived an idea that needed nothing but the helping hand of violence to be realized.

Third, the most challenging consequence of the French and American Revolutions was the idea of equality: the idea of a society in which nobody should be a master and nobody a servant. All the modern and not so modern objections—that equality and freedom are mutually exclusive, that they cannot exist side by side, that freedom presupposes rule over others, and that equality of all is nothing but the well-known condition of tyranny or leads to it—neglect the great pathos of the eighteenth-century revolutions and their challenge to all previously held conceptions of freedom. When Marx said that nobody can be free who rules over others, he summed up in one great proposition what before him Hegel, as previously indicated, had been intent on proving in the famous dialectic of master and servant: that each master is the slave of his servant, and that each servant eventually becomes his master’s master.

The basic self-contradiction in which Marx’s whole work, from the early writings to the third volume of Capital, is caught (and which can be expressed in various ways, such as that he needed violence to abolish violence, that the goal of history is to end history, that labor is the only productive activity of man but that the
development of man’s productive forces will eventually lead to the abolition of labor, etc.) arises from this insistence on freedom. For when Marx stated that labor is the most important activity of man, he was saying in terms of the tradition that not freedom but necessity is what makes man human. And he followed this line of thought throughout his philosophy of history, according to which the development of mankind is ruled by, and the meaning of history contained in, the law of historical movement, the political motor of which is class struggle and whose natural irresistible driving force is the development of man’s laboring capacity. When under the influence of the French Revolution he added to this that violence is the midwife of History, he denied in terms of the tradition the very substantial content of freedom contained in the human capacity of speech. And he followed this line of thought to its ultimate consequences in his theory of ideologies, according to which all activities of man that express themselves in the spoken word, from legal and political institutions to poetry and philosophy, were mere and perhaps unconscious pretexts for, or justifications of, violent deeds. (An ideology, according to Marx, articulates what somebody pretends to be for the sake of his active role in the world; all past laws, religions, and philosophies are such ideologies.)

From this it follows—and this was already clear in Marx’s own historical writings and has become even more manifest in all strictly Marxist historiography—that history, which is the record of past political action, shows its true, undistorted face only in wars and revolutions; and that political activity, if it is not direct, violent action, must be understood as either the preparation of future violence or the consequence of past violence. The development of capitalism is essentially the consequence of the violence of original accumulation, just as the development of the working class is essentially the preparation for the day of revolution. (When Lenin added that the twentieth century was all too likely to become a century of wars and revolutions, he likewise meant that it will be the century in which history comes to a head
and shows its true face.) Here again Marx turned at least one strand of our tradition upside down. Since Plato it had become axiomatic that “it lies in the nature of praxis to partake less of truth than speech.” According to Marx, it is not only praxis per se that shows more truth than speech, but the one kind of praxis that has severed all bonds with speech. For violence, in distinction to all other kinds of human action, is mute by definition. Speech on the other hand is not only deemed to partake less of truth than action, but is now conceived to be mere “ideological” talk whose chief function is to conceal the truth.

Marx’s conviction concerning violence is not less heretical in terms of the tradition than his conviction concerning labor, and both are closely interrelated. The statement labor created man, consciously formulated against the traditional dogma God created man, has its correlation in the affirmation that violence reveals, which stands against the traditional notion that the word of God is revelation. This Jewish-Christian understanding of the word of God, the logos theou, was never incompatible with the Greek conception of logos and has made it possible, throughout our tradition, for human speech to retain its revelatory capacity, so that it could be trusted as an instrument for communication between men as well as an instrument of “rational,” that is, truth-seeking thought. The basic mistrust of speech, as represented in Marx’s theory of ideologies—preceded by Descartes’ terrible suspicion that an evil spirit may conceal the truth from man—has proved itself to be a fundamental and efficient onslaught on religion precisely because it is an onslaught on philosophy as well.

As a matter of course Marx takes this position to be the foundation of modern science; science, according to him, “would be superfluous if the appearance and essence of things coincided.” That appearance as such was no longer thought capable of revealing essence or (and this is essentially the same) that appearance itself had become mute and no longer spoke to men who mistrusted their senses and all sense perception, is closely connected with the glorification of mute violence. Like the glorification of
labor, politically this was an onslaught on freedom, because it implied the glorification of compulsion and natural necessity. But to conclude from this that Marx’s longing for the “realm of freedom” was sheer hypocrisy, or that his statement that nobody can be free who rules over others is merely inconsistent, means not only to underrate the relevance of Marx’s work, but also to underestimate the objective difficulties and obstacles to all so-called traditional values in the modern world.

Marx’s self-contradiction is most striking in the few paragraphs that outline the ideal future society and that are frequently dismissed as utopian. They cannot be dismissed because they constitute the center of Marx’s work and express most clearly its original impulses. Moreover, if utopia means that this society has no topos, no geographical and historical place on earth, it is certainly not utopian: its geographical topos is Athens and its place in history is the fifth century before Christ. In Marx’s future society the state has withered away; there is no longer any distinction between rulers and ruled and rulership no longer exists. This corresponds to life in the ancient Greek city-state, which, although it was based on rulership over slaves as its pre-political condition, had excluded rulership from the intercourse of its free citizens. In Herodotus’ great definition (to which Marx’s statement conforms almost textually), that man is free who wants “neither to rule nor to be ruled.” Along with the state, violence in all its forms is gone, and administration has taken the place of police and army; the police are superfluous, because the legislator has become a “natural scientist who does not make or invent laws, but only formulates them” so that man has only to live in conformity with his own nature to remain within the realm of the law. The expectation that it will be easy for men to follow the few elementary rules of behavior discovered and laid down thousands of years ago (as Lenin once strikingly expressed it) in a society without property conflicts is “utopian” only if one assumes that human nature is corrupt or that human laws are not derived from natural law. But here again there is a striking resemblance to a city state in which
the citizens themselves were supposed to execute death sentences pronounced against them in accordance with the laws, so that they are not killed by special forces trained in the use of the means of violence, but rather helped by guardians to commit suicide. The superfluousness of an army, moreover, follows logically as soon as we assume with Marx that this life of the Athenian city-state has ceased to be confined to the polis and now encompasses the whole world.

Most striking of all is of course Marx’s insistence that he does not want to “liberate labor,” which already is free in all civilized countries, but to “abolish labor altogether.” And by labor Marx here does not mean only that necessary “metabolism with nature,” which is the natural condition of man, but the whole realm of work, of craftsmanship and art, that requires specialized training. This realm never fell under the general contempt for the drudgery of labor that is characteristic of our whole tradition and whose degradation specifically characterizes Athenian life in the fifth century. Only there do we find an almost complete leisure society in which the time and energy required for making a living were, so to speak, squeezed in between the much more important activities of agorēn, walking and talking in the marketplace, of going to the gymnasium, of attending meetings or the theater, or of judging conflicts between citizens. Hardly anything could be more revealing of Marx’s original impulses than the fact that he banishes from his future society not only the labor that was executed by slaves in antiquity, but also the activities of the banausoi, the craftsmen and artists: “In a communist society there are no painters, only men who, among others things, paint.” The aristocratic standards of Athenian life had indeed denied freedom to those whose work still required the exertion of effort. (That effort, and not specialization, was the chief criterion can be seen from the fact that sculptors and peasants, unlike painters and shepherds, were deemed unfree.) In other words, if we insist on examining Marx’s thought in the light of the tradition that began in Greece, and of a political philosophy that, either in
agreement or opposition, sprang from and formulated the principal experiences of Athenian polis life, we are clearly following the central indications of Marx's work itself.

This "utopian" side of Marx's teachings constitutes a basic self-contradiction, and like all such flagrant inconsistencies in the work of great writers indicates and illuminates the center of its author's thought. In Marx's case the basic inconsistency was not even his own but already existed in clear outline in the three central events that overshadowed the entire nineteenth century: the political revolutions in France and America, the Industrial Revolution in the Western world, and the demand for freedom for all that was inherent in both. These three events, rather than the work of Marx, were no longer in accord with our tradition of political thought, and it is only after them that, in its brute factuality, our world has changed beyond recognition when compared with any previous era. Even before Marx had begun to write, violence had become the midwife of history, labor had become the central activity of society, and universal equality was on its way to becoming an accomplished fact. Neither Marx nor the spiritual changes that accompanied these revolutionary events, however, can be comprehended apart from the tradition they challenged. Even today our thought still moves within the framework of familiar concepts and "ideals," which are much less utopian than most believe and usually have a very definite place in history, no matter how violently they may clash with the reality in which we live and that they are supposed to grasp.

Marx was not and, as we shall see, could not have been aware that his glorification of violence and labor challenged the traditional connection between freedom and speech. He was aware, however, of the incompatibility of freedom with the necessity that is expressed by labor, and also with the compulsion that is expressed by violence. As he put it, "The realm of freedom in fact begins only where labor, conditioned by need and exterior usefulness, ends." According to the dialectics of history, necessity and compulsion could very well bring forth freedom, except that this
solution does not really work if one, following Marx, defines the
nature of man—and not merely the way in which things human
happen—in terms of necessity. For the free, laborless man who is
supposed to emerge after the end of history would simply have
lost his most essentially human capacity, just as the actions of
men, once they have lost the element of violence, would have lost
their specifically human efficiency.

Marx had a right not to be aware of the intimate relationship
between speech and freedom as we know it from the two-sided
statement of Aristotle: that a free man is a member of a polis and
that the members of a polis are distinguished from the barbarians
through the faculty of speech. These two connected statements
had already been torn asunder by a tradition that translated the
one by declaring that man is a social being, a banality for which
one would not have needed Aristotle, and the other by defining
man as the animale rationale, the reasoning animal. In both
instances, the political point of Aristotle’s insight as well as his
concept of freedom, which corresponded with the experience of
the Greek polités, was lost.

The word politikon no longer meant a unique, outstanding way
of life, of being-together, in which the truly human capacities of
man, as distinguished from his mere animal characteristics, could
show and prove themselves. It had come to signify an all-embrac-
ing quality that men share with many animal species, which per-
haps was best expressed in the Stoic concept of mankind as one
gigantic herd under one superhuman shepherd. The word logos,
which in classical Greek usage equivocally meant both word and
reason, and thereby preserved a unity between the capacity of
speech and the capacity of thought, became ratio. The chief polit-
ical difference between ratio and logos is that the former primarily
resides in, and relates to, a reasoning individual in his singularity,
who then uses words in order to express his thoughts to others,
while logos is essentially related to others and therefore by its very
nature political. What Aristotle had seen as one and the same
human quality, to live together with others in the modus of speak-
ing, now became two distinct characteristics, to have reason and to be social. And these two characteristics, almost from the beginning, were not thought merely to be distinct, but antagonistic to each other: the conflict between man’s rationality and his sociability can be seen throughout our tradition of political thought.

This loss of the originally political experiences in the tradition of political thought had already been foreshadowed in the beginning of this tradition itself, which almost but not quite begins with Aristotle; where political thought is concerned it actually starts with Plato. Indeed, in this respect, that is, in affirming in his political philosophy the experience of the polis, Aristotle seems in open conflict with Plato (his political writings are full of polemical remarks against him), whereas the tradition that reinterpreted Aristotle’s definition of man eliminated from it all those insights into the nature of politics and man’s political freedom that were inconsistent with Platonism.

The chief difference between Plato and Aristotle in their political philosophies is that Plato, writing consciously in opposition to the political life of the decaying Greek city-state, no longer believed in the validity of the kind of speech that accompanied—in the sense of being the other side of—political action. To him, such speech was mere opinion, and as such opposed to the perception of truth, unfit either to adhere to or express truth. Persuasion, pēthēn, the form in which the citizens managed their public affairs among themselves, was to Plato an unfortunate substitute for the kind of unshakable conviction that could spring only from the direct perception of truth, a perception to which the method of dialegēn, talking a matter through between “two,” autos auto, “one” talking with one “other,” could lead. The philosophical point is that for Plato the perception of truth was essentially speechless and could only be furthered, not attained, by dialegēn. It is essential in our context that Plato, probably from the impression that the fate of Socrates and the limitations of persuasion so glaringly exposed at his trial made on him, was no longer concerned with freedom at all. Persuasion had become to
him a form, not of freedom, but of arbitrary compulsion through words, and in his political philosophy he proposed to substitute for this arbitrary compulsion the coercion of truth. Insofar as this truth was essentially speechless and could be perceived only in the solitude of contemplation, Platonic man was already not a “speaking” but a rational animal, that is, a being whose chief concern and enlightenment lay in himself, in his own reason, and not in the faculty of speech, which by definition presupposed his living among and managing his life together with his equals. When Aristotle connected speech and freedom, he was on the firm ground of a then still existing tradition rooted in experience. Yet in the end Plato remained victorious because of the fact that the Greek city-state was decaying beyond remedy—something that Plato who, as a full-fledged Athenian citizen, unlike Aristotle, knew and whose influence he suffered severely—and whose ultimate ruin he feared and tried to prevent.

In the entire tradition of philosophical, and particularly of political thought, there has perhaps been no single factor of such overwhelming importance and influence on everything that was to follow than the fact that Plato and Aristotle wrote in the fourth century, under the full impact of a politically decaying society, and under conditions where philosophy quite consciously either deserted the political realm altogether or claimed to rule it like a tyrant. This fact had first of all the most serious consequences for philosophy itself, which hardly needed Hegel to come to believe that not only philosophical thought, but nearly all thought in general, was the indication of the end of a civilization. Even more serious was the abyss that immediately opened between thought and action, and which never since has been closed. All thinking activity that is not simply the calculation of means to obtain an intended or willed end but is concerned with meaning in the most general sense came to play the role of an “afterthought,” that is, after action had decided and determined reality. Action, on the other hand, became meaningless, the realm of the accidental and haphazard upon which no great deeds any longer
shed their immortal light. The great and conflicting Roman experience remained in this respect without lasting influence, because its Christian heir followed Greek philosophy in its spiritual development and Roman practice only in its legal and institutional history. Roman experience, moreover, never brought forth a philosophical conception of its own, but from the beginning interpreted itself in the Greek categories of the fourth century. When action eventually became meaningful again it was because the remembered story of man’s actions was felt to be “in essence incoherent and immoral” (John Adams), so that history’s trostloses Ungefähr (Kant’s “melancholy haphazardness”) needed a “ruse of nature” or some other force working behind the back of acting men to achieve any dignity worthy of philosophical thought. The worst consequence, however, was that freedom became a “problem,” perhaps the most perplexing one for philosophy, and certainly the most insoluble for political philosophy. Aristotle is the last for whom freedom is not yet “problematic” but inherent in the faculty of speech; in other words, Aristotle still knew that men, as long as they talk with each other and act together in the modus of speech, are free.

* * *

We have already indicated one of the reasons why Marx’s concept of freedom, and his insistence on it as the ultimate goal of all politics, resulted in the basic inconsistency of his teaching. That reason was the early loss of interest in freedom in general as well as the early oblivion of the fundamental connection between speech and freedom, both of which are almost as old as our tradition of political thought. To this, however, must be added one altogether different difficulty, which arises less from the concept of freedom as such than from the change this concept necessarily suffers under conditions of universal equality.
Never before our own times has equality meant in terms of political reality that literally everyone is everyone else's equal—which, of course, does not imply that everybody is the same as everybody else, although the leveling tendencies of our modern society can hardly be denied. Prior to the modern age, equality was understood politically as a matter of equal rights for people of equal status. In other words, it meant that those who were equal should be treated equally, but never that everyone was equal. The Christian notion of the equality of all men before God, so frequently cited as the origin of modern political equality, never intended to make men equal on earth, but on the contrary insisted that only as citizens of a civitas Dei could they be considered equal. The shift of emphasis from civitas terrena to civitas Dei as the ultimate destiny of man did nothing to change the basic inequalities of man's political status on earth, in the framework of which political equality and equity were supposed to operate. The Christian way of life—to live in the world without being of the world—could deny the relevance of earthly distinctions between men in order to affirm the ultimate equality of destiny. But "ultimate" meant beyond this world, leaving earthly distinctions completely intact, and "destiny" referred to a beginning and end, neither of which was rooted in the earth. Because Christian equality before God did not even demand political equality of all Christians, let alone of all men, there is as little justification for praising Christianity for the modern concept of equality as there is for blaming the Church for the equanimity with which it tolerated slavery and serfdom throughout the centuries. Insofar as statesmen were Christians, and not merely statesmen who happened to be of the Christian denomination, they had nothing to do with either.

Originally equals were only those who belonged to the same group, and to extend this term to all men would have been to render it meaningless. The chief privilege inherent in this original meaning was that one's equals, and only they, had a right to judge one's own actions. It is in this sense that Cato in his last trial
complained that none of his judges were entitled to judge him, because none of them belonged to his own generation: they were not his equals, even though they were all free Roman citizens. How deeply this distinction between equals and all other men was felt, and how little our own circumstances have prepared us to understand it, can be seen clearly if we once again recall Aristotle’s definition of man, zōon logon ēchon, which as a matter of course he meant only for the inhabitants of a polis, for those who were equals, and which we immediately misunderstand as a general statement applicable to all human beings. The reason he defined the specific condition of life in a polis as the content of human as distinguished from animal life was not because he thought it applicable everywhere, but because he had decided that it was the best possible human life.

A more universal definition and concept of man appeared only in the following centuries, during the rise in late antiquity of the condition of a-polity that so curiously resembles the rise of statelessness in the modern world. Only when the philosophers had definitely (and not only theoretically, as with Plato) broken with the polis, and when political homelessness had become the status of a great many people in the world, did they conceive of man in an entirely unpolitical way, that is, independent from the way in which he lived together with his equals. The late Stoic concept of human equality, however, was as negative as the condition from which it arose. It has as much or as little to do with universal equality in the positive sense in which we live today as the Stoic concept of ataraxia, freedom as unmoveability, has to do with any positive notion of freedom. In other words, our use today of universal concepts and our tendency to universalize rules until they come to comprehend every possible individual occurrence have a lot to do with the conditions of universal equality under which we actually live, think, and act.

To what extent Marx was aware of and even obsessed by this new universal equality can be seen from his concept of the future as a classless and nationless society, that is, a society where uni-
universal equality will have razed all political boundaries between men. What he did not see, and what is so very manifest in Hobbes’ magnificent definition of human equality as the equal ability to kill, is that like all frontiers these boundaries give protection together with limitation, and not only separate but also bind men together. Marx’s greatness, and the reason for his enormous influence on modern political thought and movements, was that he discovered the positive character of this equality in the nature of man himself, that is, in his conception of man as labor force. He knew very well that this new definition of man was possible only because “the concept of human equality possesses already the solidity of a popular prejudice.” Marx’s definition of man as animal laborans stood in conscious opposition to and challenged the traditional definition of man as animal rationale.

Animal rationale, allegedly the translation of τὸν λόγον ἐχόν, still shared with Aristotle’s definition the lack of equal applicability to all men, for not all men are equally “rational,” equally capable of theoretical thought. It was the capacity to give and to listen to theoretical reasons, rather than the practical intelligence of men, that the adjective rationale primarily aimed at. The later interpretation of the rational part of man as “common sense,” despite or perhaps because of its eminently political indications, was never used to define the essence of human nature, even though this common sense was supposed to be equally strong and came to the same conclusions in every single individual. Before Marx only Hobbes—who with Montesquieu was the greatest though not the most influential political thinker of the new era that was beginning—had felt the necessity of finding a new definition of man under the assumption of universal equality. According to Hobbes, this equality was inherent in the original state of nature and “the equality of the ability to kill” defined the most general, common denominator of man. From this basic assumption he deduced the foundations of human political organisms with no less stringent logicality than Marx was to develop, from the assumption of the productive force of labor, the foundations of human society.
Marx's demand that nobody should be called free who rules over others is in complete agreement with the fact of universal equality, a condition in which by definition no one has a right to rule. Yet the elimination of rule, of the age-old distinction between those who rule and those who are ruled, is so far from being the only and sufficient condition of freedom that our tradition even deemed freedom impossible without rulership. Those who were not ruled were deemed free, and this freedom could realize itself solely among equals, indeed only where, just as Marx demanded, the distinction between rulers and subjects did not exist. Yet this freedom based on rule over slaves was a freedom that apart from such basic rulership was inconceivable, not simply because it implied the rule over other human beings but because it entailed control over those basic necessities of life that, if left uncontrolled through emancipation from the labor they require, would render all freedom illusory. Freedom in this original sense was a state of being rather than a faculty; and politics, in any strict sense of the word, was thought to begin when that state had been realized. Political life rested on rulership, but to rule and to be ruled was not its content. Where this was the case, as in the Oriental despotisms, the peoples concerned were seen by the Greeks as living under conditions of servitude, that is, as living under pre-political conditions. Freedom therefore was not one of the political "goods," such as honor or justice or wealth or any other good, and it never was enumerated as belonging to man's eudaimonia, his essential well-being or happiness. Freedom was the pre-political condition of political activities and therefore of all the goods that men can enjoy through their living together. As such, freedom was taken for granted and did not need to be defined. When he stated that the political life of a free citizen was characterized by logon elon, by being conducted in the manner of speech, Aristotle defined the essence of free men and their behavior, not the essence of freedom as a human good.

Universal equality cannot coexist with freedom as the pre-political condition of political life and with the absolute rule over
laborers; it is the latter that makes it possible for free citizens to escape the coercive necessities of biological life, at least to the extent that such necessities demand of man specific activities. Marx's own formulation that freedom is incompatible with rule over others only enhances this difficulty. If it were true, a Greek might have answered him by saying that then freedom is impossible: all men would be slaves of necessity—the necessity to eat and to live, to preserve and regenerate life. Not only are slaves not human, but no man is fully human under these conditions. Nor does the later development of the concept of freedom, which made it one of the most cherished goods within the political realm, change anything in this basic traditional incompatibility between freedom and universal equality. The most important and far-reaching change is already clearly visible in Aristotle, whose definitions of governments are not consistent with his definition of man as citizen. It is as though he himself had already forgotten what the whole tradition after him was bound to let sink into oblivion, namely, the intimate connection between freedom and speech on the one hand, and between rule and necessity on the other. What happened was that rule over others, which originally had been experienced as rule over slaves and therefore as a pre-political condition for the life of the polis, entered the political realm itself and, by dividing men who lived together into those who ruled and those who were ruled, even became its dominating factor. From then on, that is, almost immediately after Aristotle, the problem of power became the decisive political problem, so that this whole realm of human life could be defined, not as the realm of living together, but as the realm of power struggles in which nothing is so much at stake as the question of who rules over whom.

Rule over others very early ceased to be a merely pre-political condition of all political life, for no sooner had it entered the political realm proper than it became at once its very center. This change can best be observed in the definitions of the forms of government, which no longer were understood as various ways of
living together but as various forms of rulership among citizens. Kingship and aristocracy, which Plato still defined as resting on distinction (their only minor difference being that the former rests on the distinction of one among the ruling citizens, whereas in the latter several are distinguished), now became monarchy and oligarchy. In monarchy one man, and in oligarchy several men hold power over all others. Plato still thought that these forms of government were plainly perversions, no true politeiai but born from some violent upheaval and dependent on violence (bia). The use of violence disqualifies all forms of government because, according to the older conception, violence begins wherever the polis, the political realm proper, ends. It ends either in the rule over slaves, which makes this realm possible in the first place, or in the defense of the walls of the city, or in the transgression of the boundary of the laws to which all citizens have submitted themselves voluntarily.

Aristotle, who still uses the older concepts of kingship, aristocracy, and polity to indicate the “good” forms of governments, already actually thinks that the question of who rules over whom, or of how many hold power, is the decisive criterion that distinguishes them from each other. In other words, he always describes monarchy as the rule of one, oligarchy as the rule of the few, and democracy as the rule of the majority. However, since the element of violence present in ruling as such would also for him have disqualified these forms of government, he had to introduce the law in an altogether different meaning. The law was now no longer the boundary (which the citizens ought to defend like the walls of the city, because it had the same function for the citizen’s political life as the city’s wall had for their physical existence and distinctness, as Heraclitus had said), but became a yardstick by which rule could be measured. Rule now either conformed to or overruled the law, and in the latter case the rule was called tyrannical—usually, although not necessarily, exerted by one man—and therefore a kind of perverted monarchy. From then on, law and power became the two conceptual pillars of all definitions of gov-
government, and these definitions hardly changed during the more than 2,000 years that separate Aristotle from Montesquieu. Since violence in its arbitrary form remained a disqualifying factor, the main question now became whether or not the rule over others conformed to the existing laws, whereas the question of how many actually were in possession of power became less and less relevant. Kant only drew the last consequence from this tradition of political thought when he reduced the number of forms of government to two: to rule over others according to law, which he called republican, and its opposite, rule by lawless, arbitrary power, which he called tyrannical.

In a sense this development is a complete reversal of the earlier Greek political experience, in which an all important qualification for political life was the pre-political rule over slaves, that is, when only those who held power over others were considered free and fit to participate in politics at all. This early experience, however, was never altogether lost. Politics somehow, though in a very changed way, was still connected with freedom; freedom remained connected with exerting rule, and only rulers were deemed free. This is the context in which freedom could become a “good,” something to be enjoyed, closely connected with the power of doing as one pleases, either within or beyond the limits of the law. Freedom remained with the “ruling class,” and continued to presuppose others being ruled, even though it was no longer the condition but had become the very content of political life. Thus when universal equality appeared as an unavoidable demand for justice for everyone, for a social and political body in which all were free and no one was ruled, it had all the earmarks of a contradiction in terms: within the tradition of political thought the concept of universal equality could only mean that nobody could be free.

With the anticipated disappearance of rule and domination in Marx’s stateless society, freedom indeed becomes a meaningless word unless it is conceived in an altogether different sense. Since Marx here as elsewhere did not bother to redefine his terms but
remained in the conceptual framework of the tradition, Lenin was not so wrong when he concluded that if nobody can be free who rules over others, then freedom is only a prejudice or an ideology—although he thereby robbed Marx’s work of one of its most important impulses. His adherence to tradition is also the reason for the even more fateful error of Marx as well as Lenin that mere administration, in contrast to government, is the adequate form of men living together under the condition of radical and universal equality. Administration was supposed to be no rule, but it can actually be only rule by nobody, that is, bureaucracy, a form of government without responsibility. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which the personal element of rulership has disappeared, and it is of course true that such a government may even rule in the interest of no class. But this no-man-rule, the fact that in an authentic bureaucracy nobody occupies the empty chair of the ruler, does not mean that the conditions of rule have disappeared. This nobody rules very effectively when looked upon from the side of the ruled, and, what is worse, as a form of government it has one important trait in common with tyranny. Tyrannical power is defined by the tradition as arbitrary power, and this originally signified a rule for which no account need be given, a rule that owes no one any responsibility. The same is true for the bureaucratic rule by nobody, though for an altogether different reason. There are many people in a bureaucracy who may demand an account, but nobody to give it because nobody cannot be held responsible. In the stead of the tyrant’s arbitrary decisions we find the haphazard settlements of universal procedures, settlements that are without malice and arbitrariness because there is no will behind them, but to which there is also no appeal. As far as the ruled are concerned, the net of the patterns in which they are caught is by far more dangerous and more deadly than mere arbitrary tyranny. But bureaucracy should not be mistaken for totalitarian domination. If the October Revolution had been permitted to follow the lines prescribed by Marx and Lenin, which was not the case, it would probably
have resulted in bureaucratic rule. The rule of nobody, not anarchy, or disappearance of rule, or oppression, is the ever-present danger of any society based on universal equality.

Labor, violence, and freedom indicate the central challenges to our tradition that appeared in the three great events of the modern era, and which Marx attempted to formulate and think through. Compared with them, the one reversal of traditional “values” of which Marx himself was aware, the turning away from “idealism” to “materialism”—by which he believed he had turned Hegel upside down, and for which he has so frequently been praised or blamed—is of minor importance. Such turning operations, however, were characteristic of the new age’s conscious rebellion against, and unconscious bondage to, tradition. We are reminded of Kierkegaard’s turning the relationship between philosophy and religion upside down; and of Nietzsche’s inverted Platonism that, while assuming with Plato that eternal essence and perishable mortal life are contradictions, arrived at the anti-Platonic conclusion that man, insofar as he is a living being, can only be hindered in his being alive through the so-called essential. This last instance is particularly instructive, since Plato himself already thought he had achieved such a turning operation in his teaching that it is not the merely living and hence mortal body but the soul, precisely because it is intangible, that could attain immortality by partaking in true reality, the reality not of the objects of the senses but of the ideas that are seen and grasped only with the eyes of the soul. The periagôgê, he demanded, was a turning around by which everything commonly believed in Greece in accordance with the Homeric religion was stood on its head. At least this is quite obviously what Plato himself believed. One may think that Nietzsche, when he reversed Plato, was only returning to a pre-Platonic philosophy; but of course that is not the case, for Nietzsche, like Marx, remained in the framework of the tradition despite all turnings around. To exalt the sensual, as Nietzsche did, one needs the reality of the spiritual, just as Plato needed the brute factuality of the sensual as the given back-
ground against which the soul could perform its periagōgē, its
turning toward the realm of ideas. Plato, whose work is filled with
direct and indirect polemical replies to Homer, did not turn
Homer downside up, but he did lay the groundwork of a philos-
ophy in which such turning operations were indeed not only a far-
fetching possibility, but almost a conclusive necessity. The whole
development of philosophy in late antiquity, with its innumerable
schools all fighting each other with a fanaticism unparalleled in
the pre-Christian world, largely consists of turning operations that
were made possible by Plato’s periagōgē, and for which the Pla-
tonic separation of a world of mere shadowy appearances from a
world of eternally true ideas had erected the framework.

When in a last gigantic effort Hegel gathered together the vari-
ous strands of traditional philosophy as they had developed from
Plato’s original conception, fitting them into one consistent
whole, a similar splitting up into two conflicting schools of
thought ensued, though on a much lower level: for a short while
philosophic thought was dominated by right-wing and left-wing
Hegelians. But the three great reversals that eventually were to
conclude, at least up to our time, the great uninterrupted tradi-
tion of philosophy—Kierkegaard’s leap from doubt into belief,
Nietzsche’s reversed Platonism, and Marx’s leap from theory into
praxis—(though none of them would have been possible without
Hegel and his concept of history and in this one all important
respect all three were and remained followers of Hegel), also
point to a much more radical break with the tradition than any
mere upside-down operation requires. Of these breaks Marx’s
had the most immediate consequences, simply because it had
touched our tradition of political thought and therefore could
become directly influential on political developments.

Marx’s break certainly did not consist in his “materialism” or in
his turning Hegel upside down. Lenin was altogether right when
he remarked that no one could understand Das Kapital who had
not mastered Hegel’s Logik. In Marx’s own opinion, what made
socialism scientific and distinguished it from that of his predeces-
sors, the “utopian socialists,” was not an economic theory with its scientific insights as well as its errors, but the discovery of a law of movement that ruled matter and, at the same time, showed itself in the reasoning capacity of man as “consciousness,” either of the self or of a class. The tremendous practical advantage of Marx’s “scientific” over utopian socialism was, and still is, that it liberated the socialist movement from its worn-out moralizing attitudes, and recognized that the class questions in modern society could no longer be solved by a “passion for justice” or on the basis of a slightly modified Christian charity. If labor is the central activity of modern society, it is absurd to think of members of the working class as underprivileged, no matter how oppressed or exploited they may happen to be at any particular moment. The introduction of a dialectical historical movement, according to which the last will be first, at least offered an account of the tremendous power potential of this class, a potential that came to light only several decades after Marx’s death.

The dialectical movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—which becomes infinite as each synthesis at once establishes itself as a new thesis from which a new antithesis and a new synthesis flow—holds man and matter in its grip and mixes them with each other, then separates them from each other, antithetically, so that they may appear distinct as matter and spirit, only to reunite them synthetically. The foundation of experience on which Hegel’s as well as Marx’s dialectic rests is the all-encompassing eternal process of nature’s metabolism, of which man’s metabolism with nature is only an infinitesimally small part, on the one hand, and the fact of human history on the other. The logic of dialectal movement enables Marx to combine nature with history, or matter with man; man becomes the author of a meaningful, comprehensible history because his metabolism with nature, unlike an animal’s, is not merely consumptive but requires an activity, namely, labor. For Marx labor is the uniting link between matter and man, between nature and history. He is a “materialist” insofar as the specifically human form of consuming matter is to him the
beginning of everything; and he is an “idealist” insofar as nothing ever comes from matter by itself without the consuming activity that lies in the nature of man, which is labor. In other words “materialism” and “idealism” have lost their meaning, although Marx himself seems not to have been aware of this. The greatness of Hegel’s system, and the reason why it was so extremely difficult to escape its influence if one wanted to remain within the scope of traditional philosophy at all, lies in his incorporation of the two “worlds” of Plato into one moving whole. The traditional turning from the world of appearance to the world of ideas or, conversely, the turning from the world of ideas back to the world of appearance, takes place in the historical motion itself and becomes the form—although not the content, which is the realization of the Absolute—of the dialectical movement.

Each of the three statements by Marx—Labor is the Creator of Man, Violence is the midwife of History, and No one can be free who enslaves others—is revolutionary in the sense that it follows and brings into articulate thought the three revolutionary events that ushered in the modern world. None, however, is revolutionary in the sense that with it or through it a revolution came to pass. And only the first is revolutionary in the sense that it is in flagrant conflict with the whole of our tradition of political thought. This first statement is also, characteristically enough, the one least suspected of “revolutionary tendencies” in the subversive meaning of the term, and therefore more difficult to understand than the others. The decisive difference of our own world from all previous ages, the dignification of labor, has already acquired the doubtful status of a commonplace, and this in little more than a century. Marx’s prophecies may have been wrong in almost all respects, although he certainly did not err more than is the common lot of social scientists. But in this one respect—in his conviction that the future belongs to man as a laboring animal, to those, that is, who have nothing but their laboring capacity, whom he called the proletariat—he was so right that we, even today, are hardly aware of it. The point is not whether the classical econo-
mists, whom Marx in his economic theories followed closely despite all of his criticisms, were right in maintaining that labor is the source of all wealth, but rather that we live in a society of laborers. That is, we live in a society in which men consider all their activities primarily as laboring activities, in the sense that their end is “the preservation of individual life,” and themselves primarily as owners of labor force. It is in this sense that those who manifestly do not labor, who do not earn their living through labor, are in a society of laborers judged to be parasites.

Because labor has lost one of its chief characteristics, apparent not only in all traditional definitions of the word but also in its etymological origin in nearly every language, this basic condition of modern life is frequently neglected. Labor has indeed become effortless, just as childbirth tends to become less and less painful. The effort of labor and the pain of birth, both mentioned as the punishment for man’s sin in the third chapter of the first book of the Bible, belonged together because both expressed the fact that man was subject to the compulsion of necessity for his very life. Labor and its effort were required for maintaining and preserving individual life, just as birth and its pain were unavoidable for the reproduction of the species. Effort and pain were not just the symptoms, but the modi in which the basic necessity inherent in the human condition made itself felt and revealed itself. Labor, namely that activity that is both required for, and inherent in, being alive, does not lose its character of compulsion because it has become easier, although it is true that it is more difficult to perceive coercive necessity in the guise of ease than in the harsh brutality of pain and effort.

What Marx foresaw was that the Industrial Revolution was bound to “enlarge the realm of natural necessity,” that is, the realm of labor, despite all technical developments that tend to make labor effortless. This enlargement is closely bound to the gigantic multiplication of needs, the fulfillment of which is felt to belong to the necessities of life, and the most immediate and tangible result of which has been that the “figure of the laborer” has
indeed become the central figure of our society. In this society the old verse “Who does not labor shall not eat” has assumed a direct relevance that stands in opposition to all other periods of human history. The social revolution of our time is contained in the simple fact that until not much more than 100 years ago, mere laborers had been denied political rights, whereas today we accept as a matter of course the opinion that a nonlaborer may not even have the right to stay alive.

Marx’s own hope, nourished by his belief in the dialectical structure of everything that happens, was that somehow this absolute rule of necessity would result in, or resolve itself into, an equally absolute rule of freedom. That is the only strictly utopian element in his thought. But it is also the only and perhaps desperate conclusion to be drawn from a tradition that holds, in Marx’s own words, that the “realm of freedom begins where laboring ends.” According to Marx it is foolish to think it possible to liberate and emancipate laborers, that is, those whose very activity subjects them to necessity. When all men have become laborers, the realm of freedom will indeed have vanished. The only thing that then remains is to emancipate man from labor, something that in all probability is just as impossible as the early hope of the philosophers to free man’s soul from his body.

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Unavoidably, first and foremost the tradition of political thought contains the philosophers’ traditional attitude toward politics. Political thought itself is older than our tradition of philosophy, which begins with Plato and Aristotle, just as philosophy itself is older and contains more than the Western tradition eventually accepted and developed. At the beginning, therefore, not of our political or philosophical history, but of our tradition of political philosophy, stands Plato’s contempt for politics, his conviction that “the affairs and actions of men (τα τῶν ἄνθρωπων πραγ-
mata) are not worthy of great seriousness" and that the only reason why the philosopher needs to concern himself with them is the unfortunate fact that philosophy—or, as Aristotle somewhat later would say, a life devoted to it, the bios theorëtikos—is materially impossible without a halfway reasonable arrangement of all affairs that concern men insofar as they live together. At the beginning of the tradition politics exists because men are alive and mortal, while philosophy concerns those matters that are eternal, like the universe. Insofar as the philosopher is also a mortal man he, too, is concerned with politics. But this concern has only a negative relationship to his being a philosopher: he is afraid, as Plato so abundantly made clear, that through bad management of political affairs he will not be able to pursue philosophy. Scholé, like the Latin otium, is not leisure as such but only leisure from political duty, nonparticipation in politics, and therefore the freedom of the mind for its concern with the eternal (the aë on), which is possible only if the needs and necessities of mortal life have been taken care of. Politics, therefore, seen from the specifically philosophical viewpoint, begins already in Plato to comprehend more than politeuesthai, more than those activities that are characteristic of the ancient Greek polis, for which the mere fulfillment of the needs and necessities of life were a pre-political condition. Politics begins, as it were, to expand its realm downward to the necessities of life themselves, so that to the philosophers' scorn for the perishable affairs of mortals was added the specifically Greek contempt for everything that is necessary for mere life and survival. As Cicero, in his futile attempt to disavow Greek philosophy on this one point—its attitude to politics—succinctly pointed out, if only "all that is essential to our wants and comforts were supplied by some magic wand, as in the legends, then every man of first-rate ability could drop all other responsibility and devote himself exclusively to knowledge and science." In brief, when the philosophers began to concern themselves with politics in a systematic way, politics at once became for them a necessary evil.
Thus our tradition of political philosophy, unhappily and fatefully, and from its very beginning, has deprived political affairs, that is, those activities concerning the common public realm that come into being wherever men live together, of all dignity of their own. In Aristotelian terms, politics is a means to an end; it has no end in and by itself. More than that, the proper end of politics is in a way its opposite, namely, nonparticipation in political affairs, scholè, the condition of philosophy, or rather the condition of a life devoted to it. In other words, no other activity appears as antiphilosophical, as hostile to philosophy, as political activity in general and action in particular, with the exception, of course, of what was never deemed to be strictly human activity at all, such as mere laboring. Spinoza polishing lenses eventually could become the symbolic figure of the philosopher, just as innumerable examples taken from the experiences of work, craftsmanship, and the liberal arts since the time of Plato could serve to lead by analogy to the higher knowledge of philosophic truths. But since Socrates no man of action, that is, no one whose original experience was political, as for instance Cicero’s was, could ever hope to be taken seriously by the philosophers; and no specifically political deeds, or human greatness as expressed in action, could ever hope to serve as examples in philosophy, in spite of the never forgotten glory of Homer’s praise of the hero. Philosophy is farther removed from praxis even than it is from poiesis.

Of perhaps even greater consequence for the degradation of politics is that in the light of philosophy—for which the origin and principle, the archè, are one and the same—politics does not even have an origin of its own: it came into being only because of the elementary and pre-political fact of biological necessity, which makes men need each other in the arduous task of staying alive. Politics, in other words, is derivative in a twofold sense: it has its origin in the pre-political data of biological life, and it has its end in the postpolitical, highest possibility of human destiny. And since it is the curse, as we have seen, of pre-political necessities to require laboring, we may now say that politics is limited by labor.
from below and by philosophy from above. Both are excluded from politics strictly speaking, the one as its lowly origin and the other as its exalted aim and end. Very much like the activity of the class of guardians in Plato’s Republic, politics is supposed to watch and manage the livelihood and the base necessities of labor on the one hand, and to take its orders from the apolitical théòria of philosophy on the other. Plato’s demand for a philosopher-king does not mean that philosophy itself should, or ever even could be realized in an ideal polity, but rather that rulers who value philosophy more than any other activity should be permitted to rule in such a way that there may be philosophy, that philosophers will have scholè, and be undisturbed by those matters that arise from our living together and that, in turn, have their ultimate origin in the imperfections of human life.

Political philosophy never recovered from this blow dealt by philosophy to politics at the very beginning of our tradition. The contempt for politics, the conviction that political activity is a necessary evil, due partly to the necessities of life that force men to live as laborers or rule over slaves who provide for them, and partly to the evils that come from living together itself, that is, to the fact that the multitude, whom the Greeks called hoi polloi, threatens the existence of every single person, runs like a red thread throughout the centuries that separate Plato from the modern age. In this context it is irrelevant whether this attitude expresses itself in secular terms, as in Plato and Aristotle, or if it does so in the terms of Christianity. It was Tertullian who first held that, insofar as we are Christians, nulla réspUBLICA quam réspública (“to us nothing is more alien than public affairs”) and nevertheless still insisted on the necessity of the civitas terræ, of secular government, because of man’s sinfulness and because, as Luther was to put it much later, true Christians wohnen fern von einander, that is, dwell far from each other and are as forlorn among the multitude as were the ancient philosophers. What is important is that the same notion was taken up, again in secular terms, by post-Christian philosophy, as it were
surviving all other changes and radical turnings about, expressing itself now in the melancholy reflection of Madison, that government surely is nothing but a reflection on human nature, which would not be necessary if men were angels, now in the angry words of Nietzsche, that no government can be good about which the subjects have to worry at all. With respect to the evaluation of politics, though in no other, it is irrelevant whether the civitas Dei gives meaning and order to the civitas terrrena, or whether the bios theorëtikos prescribes its rules and is the ultimate end of the bios politikos.

What matters, in addition to the inherent degradation of this whole realm of life through philosophy, is the radical separation of those matters that men can reach and attain only through living and acting together from those that are perceived and cared about by man in his singularity and solitude. And here again, it does not matter if man in his solitude searches for truth, finally attaining it in the speechless contemplation of the idea of ideas, or whether he cares for the salvation of his soul. What matters is the unbridgeable abyss that opened and has never been closed, not between the so-called individual and the so-called community (which is the latest and most phony way of stating the authentic and old problem), but between being in solitude and living together. Compared to this perplexity, the equally old and vexing problem of the relationship, or rather nonrelationship, between action and thought, is secondary in importance. Neither the radical separation between politics and contemplation, between living together and living in solitude as two distinct modes of life, nor their hierarchical structure, was ever doubted after Plato had established both. Here again the only exception is Cicero who, out of his great Roman political experience, doubted the validity of the superiority of the bios theorëtikos over the bios politikos, the validity of solitude over the communitas. Rightly but futilely Cicero objected that he who was devoted to "knowledge and science" would flee his "solitude and ask for a companion in his study, be it in order to teach or to learn, to lis-
ten or to speak.” Here as elsewhere the Romans paid a steep price for their contempt of philosophy, which they held to be “impractical.” The end result was the undisputed victory of Greek philosophy and the loss of Roman experience for occidental political thought. Cicero, because he was not a philosopher, was unable to challenge philosophy.

The question whether Marx, who at the end of the tradition challenged its formidable unanimity about the proper relationship between philosophy and politics, was a philosopher in the traditional sense or even in any authentic sense, need not be decided. The two decisive statements that sum up abruptly and, as it were, inarticulately his thought on the matter—“The philosophers have only interpreted the world. . .the point, however, is to change it,” and “You cannot supersede (aufheben in the Hegelian triple sense of conserve, raise to a higher level, and abolish) philosophy without realizing it”—are so intimately phrased in Hegel’s terminology and thought along his lines that, taken by themselves, their explosive content notwithstanding, they can almost be regarded as an informal and natural continuation of Hegel’s philosophy. For nobody could have thought before Hegel that philosophy is interpretation (of the world or anything else) or that philosophy could be realized except in the bios theoratikos, the life of the philosopher himself. What is to be realized, moreover, is not any specific or new philosophy, not the philosophy, for instance, of Marx himself, but the highest destiny of man as traditional philosophy, culminating in Hegel, defined it.

Marx does not challenge philosophy, he challenges the alleged impracticality of philosophy. He challenges the philosophers’ resignation to do no more than find a place for themselves in the world, instead of changing the world and making it “philosophical.” And this is not only more than but also decisively different from Plato’s ideal of philosophers who should rule as kings, because it implies not the rule of philosophy over men but that all men, as it were, become philosophers. The consequence that Marx drew from Hegel’s philosophy of history (and Hegel’s
entire philosophical work, including the Logik, has only this one topic: history) was that action, contrary to the philosophical tradition, was so far from being the opposite of thought that it was its true, namely real vehicle, and that politics, far from being infinitely beneath the dignity of philosophy, was the only activity that was inherently philosophical.

Notes

1Arendt refers to Plato’s legendary voyages to Syracuse, as reflected in the perhaps authentic Seventh and Eighth Epistles. Ed.

2Politics 1279b11-1280a3. Ed.

3It is worth quoting in full the sentence from Hegel’s “Preface” to his Philosophy of Right in which this famous image appears: “Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Grau lässt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug.” Ed.

4Theses on Feuerbach, XI. Ed.

5In Arendt’s Denktagebuch (forthcoming from Piper Verlag) of 1953 there occurs the following entry: “Burckhardt (Griechische Kulturgeschichte I, 355-56), macht aufmerksam, dass die griechischen Götter keiner Dienerschaft bedurften: nur die Menschen brauchen Sklaven; die Götter waren frei von irdischer Notdurft, wenn auch dem Schicksal unterworfen. Diese Freiheit hängt mit ihrer Unsterblichkeit zusammen? Jedenfalls sind die griechischen Götter gekennzeichnet durch das ‘leichte’ leben, ihr Dasein ist mührös.” This train of thought recurs in one of the epigraphs that Arendt selected in 1975 for her book on Judging, which she did not live to write. Late in the second part of Faust Goethe wrote that if one could give up magic and stand before nature only as a man, then the pain, toil, and labor of being human would be worthwhile: “Da wär’s der Mühe wert ein Mensch zu sein.” Ed.

6Elsewhere in these manuscripts Arendt makes the point that Marx was the first to view political history as “made by men as laboring animals. . . . Then it must be possible to make history in the process of labor, of productivity, to make history as we make things. . . . Marx’s theory of history sees its decisive movement in the development of the forces of production, and the forces of production are ultimately based on labor as a force.” Ed.
In State and Revolution, Lenin wrote that “people will gradually become accustomed to the observance of the elementary rules of social life that have been repeated for thousands of years” (quoted by Arendt in the first edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism). Ed.