BACKGROUND AND ULTERIOR MOTIVE OF MARX'S
“PREFACE” OF 1859

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Marx's interpretation of history is one of the seminal contributions to our understanding of historical processes and, with regard to the author's own work, it forms the indispensable link between his revolutionary zeal to change the world and his analysis of capitalism. Yet Marx has nowhere in all his works given us anything that could pass even as an effort at systematic exposition of his "economic" or "materialistic" interpretation. It is no doubt this omission that accounts for the extraordinary significance attributed to the "Preface" to his Critique of Political Economy of 1859; for here, inserted in an autobiographical sketch, we find at least a statement of certain principles for the interpretation of history. Thus, for lack of anything better, this passage, though it covers little more than two pages, gives no definitions, and contains some very puzzling features, has come to be regarded as the "classical interpretation" of Marx's conception of history. This acceptance has been so general that it would be merely a work of supererogation to prove it with a wealth of quotations; suffice it to mention the words of a recent British writer that the propositions in the "Preface" have "always, since that time, been treated as the classic formulation of historical materialism." ¹ From this acceptance there has been, to the best of our knowledge, only a single exception: that of the French syndicalist, Georges Sorel.

According to the Communist Manifesto, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," and in virtually all of Marx's writings the paramount importance of classes, with their economic interests, their ideologies, and their struggles, is abundantly clear. To a Marxist, therefore, a theory of history in which the very existence of classes is ignored must make about as much sense as a chess board, complete with all the pieces—but the two kings. And yet, the "Preface" never as much as mentions the word "class," let alone the class struggle! It appears strange indeed that nobody but Georges Sorel should have noticed and taken exception to this fatal flaw. That keen and erudite student of Marx examined the "Preface" and found it wanting.² The formulations, he says, are extremely concentrated, partly symbolic, and therefore very hard to interpret; the word "class" does not even occur. From this Sorel concludes that the commentators who regard the passage in the "Preface" as the classical formulation of Marx's doctrine are thoroughly wrong.³

Sorel's work Les Illusions du Progrès appeared more than 60 years ago, ten years before publication of the first serious biography of Marx, five before the heavily censored first edition of Marx's correspondence with Engels. With the scanty source material then available, even a man of Sorel's keen

¹John Plamenatz, German Marxism and Russian Communism (London, 1963), 18–20.
³Ibid., 2f.
intuition could go no further. Today, however, a wealth of historical and biographical material enables us to go a long way in determining the true character and purpose of the "Preface."

The key to a real understanding lies above all in a close study of the historical background of the book of which the "Preface" forms a part, and of the crucial personal dilemma of the author. Published in 1859 in Berlin, the Critique naturally was subject to the general influences and conditions which at that juncture—between the defeat of the 1848 Revolution and the beginning of Prussia's so-called "New Era" in 1860—prevailed in the German book trade. Of these, the most important were the existing restrictions on the freedom of expression whose nature, extent, and main implications we must envisage. Although these are not easy to summarize, since each of the 34 German states had its own laws, regulations, and bureaucratic hierarchy, at least the salient common features can be pointed out.

Everyone of the states employed censors whose common purpose was to prevent publication and sale of all politically obnoxious material. What was not passed on by a German censor—a good deal was published abroad, especially in Switzerland—was illegal ipso facto and therefore, if discovered, liable to confiscation. Everywhere, it is true, a sharp distinction was made between newspaper articles, pamphlets, and similar short publications on the one hand, and more voluminous works, generally defined as "books of 20 sheets or more," on the other; the main practical difference was that books above the required minimum size were free of preventive censorship. The significance of this kind of freedom was not as great as it might seem; for even the more voluminous works could always be prohibited after publication—with all the appalling losses involved for publishers, booksellers, and authors. Yet, under the circumstances this "20 sheet freedom," as it came to be called, possessed some real significance, inasmuch as a manuscript of twenty sheets stood a better chance of publication and sale. Clever writers, therefore, would from the outset plan on larger works; if they did not quite make the required size, ingenious publishers knew a variety of helpful tricks, one of which was the use of extra-large type.

However, even when this hurdle had been taken, the course was still studied with others that required a high degree of skill and dexterity, and there were hidden ditches that would trip up all but the luckiest riders. In Prussia social critics feared particularly certain paragraphs of the Penal Code, which public prosecutors could stretch to amazing lengths. There was, above all, Paragraph 100 which threatened with prison, of up to two years, anyone who incited one class of the population to hatred and contempt of other classes; besides, any publication containing such obnoxious material would be liable to confiscation. It was this paragraph under which Ferdinand Lassalle was con-

A wealth of information on censorship in the German states is to be found in Polizei und Zensur: Längs- und Querschnitte durch die Geschichte der Buch und Theâterzensur (Berlin, 1926), by H. H. Houben. A more voluminous work by the same author is Verbotene Literatur von der klassischen Zeit bis zur Gegenwart (Vol. I, Berlin, 1924, Vol. II, Bremen, 1928). Finally, a great deal of information with a socialist bias is to be found in the famous Geschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie (5th ed., Stuttgart 1923), by Franz Mehring.

On this, see esp. Mehring, ibid., II, 210–13.
victed after publication of his *Workers Program—nota bene*, in 1863, after
the beginning of the so-called “New Era” which was supposed to mark a big
step toward more liberal conditions. Of the decade of the 1850’s it can be said
without fear of overstatement that actual conditions were scarcely any better
than before the Revolution, since the country was in the iron grip of a power-
ful and ruthless police system.

Inevitably, these political conditions had profound effects on authors,
publishers, and readers. About the latter, not much need be said. The aware-
ness that any author who dared to touch on sensitive topics had to be ex-
tremely cautious in choosing his words made the reader pay attention to every
shade of expression, try to catch every hint and allusion.

As to booksellers and especially publishers, theirs was a hazardous occu-
pation! Most publishers were too intimidated to accept manuscripts that
either by their contents or their authors were likely to displease the authori-
ties. A minority, it is true, took risks, relying on their ingenuity and experi-
ence in dealing with censors and police. As to the effect on the authors, the
highly respected Eduard von Simson complained in 1849 that *censorship had
produced the art of reading between the lines and thus induced authors to
practice the art of writing between the lines.* Perhaps the best expert in this
field, H. Houben, describes at length how outfoxing the censor, pulling wool
over his eyes, and so forth became a sport not confined to journalists. “A cer-
tain obliqueness, craftiness, insincerity became fashionable” so that pessi-
mists deplored the spread of a “thieves’ slang.”

Any writer who had reason to fear the censor’s wrath found certain pre-
cautionary measures useful. When broaching an awkward subject, it was
well to express oneself so vaguely that in case of need everything could be
“explained away” with indignant protests that the author’s pure intentions
had been misunderstood. Of course, writers bold enough to use such dangerous
words as “class” or “revolution” would find *deliberate vagueness a vital neces-
sity.* Of the other helpful devices, by far the most important was the use of the
tremendous popular prestige and privileged position which science and learn-
ing traditionally enjoyed in Germany. With unfailing instinct, Ferdinand
Lassalle, convicted by a lower court of having incited the poorer classes, en-
titled his great speech before the Court of Appeals “Science and the
Worker,” and invoked Article 20 of the Constitution which proclaimed
freedom of science and its teaching.

These were, of course, only some of the most common devices to hood-
wink or influence the authorities; for need makes man inventive, and pressing
need there was.

To find out how these conditions affected the “Critique,” we need not go
into Marx’s many clashes with censorship and police prior to his arrival in


7Walter Bussmann, “Das Zeitalter Bismarcks,” in *Handbuch der deutschen
Geschichte* (Konstanz, 1956), 9–10 and 16–17.

8For many interesting details, see Houben’s work *Polizei und Zensur*, 41–51, as
well as his larger work *Verbotene Literature*, I, 390 sq. 9Houben, *Polizei und Zensur*, 90.

10See Lassalle’s great speech before the Criminal Court in Berlin, in *Ferdinand
Lassalle’s Reden und Schriften*, herausgegeben von Eduard Bernstein, London,
Band II.
Britain; for these are matters of record, noted by every competent biographer. However, the main results of those experiences must be realized.

On the one hand, there are certain stark facts. While still in his twenties, Marx had not only become a “bête noire” to the Prussian authorities but had acquired a certain international notoriety by attracting, at some time or other, the unfavorable attention of the French and Belgian governments and even of H. M. the Tsar. Finally, during the Revolution, the “monumental insolence” with which the “Neue Rheinische Zeitung” had lashed out against all the forces of reaction had made Marx’s name more odious than ever. On the other hand, however, he was now a hard-bitten veteran, fully aware of the manifold powers, as well as the few weak spots, of the forces arrayed against him, among which the foremost were Prussia’s censorship and police. In this respect he had not only his own bitter experiences to draw upon; in Paris he had enjoyed the friendship of his fellow-exile Heinrich Heine who had long been one of the most vociferous, skillful, and persistent fighters against German reaction; and if there was anything Marx had to learn about the fine and esoteric arts of fighting, dodging, hoodwinking, and mollifying German censors—here was his brilliant mentor! In view of so much previous experience and private tuition it stands to reason that when Marx landed in Britain, he could be under no delusions about the tremendous difficulties of trying to write for a German public from abroad. Nevertheless, he undertook to do just that—for reasons which to him seemed compelling and which become clear from the circumstances of his life and the goals he pursued.

Fortunately, we need not describe the wretched poverty in which he lived nor the cruel tragedies of his private life; of these, able biographers have given truthful and poignant pictures. What concerns us here is his situation as a revolutionary fighter and an author.

In his first decade in London Marx was virtually isolated from the British labor movement and, indeed, from the political life of the country. Chartism, which in the 1840’s had been a powerful and revolutionary influence, was in rapid decline—a process largely due to the prosperity of British industry and a somewhat rising wage level. But apart from the growing trend toward reformism, Marx could not exert any influence because he was personally unacceptable. Almost every description of the British proletariat during that period stresses its profound distrust of all foreigners and, even more so, of intellectuals. Also his markedly Jewish appearance, though its importance should not be exaggerated, was not helpful. Last but not least, Marx was no orator even in his mother tongue; when he landed in Britain he could speak

12See Mehring’s classic biography *Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962), 187.
14For a good survey of the conditions in the 1850’s, see David Thomson, *England in the 19th Century* (London 1950), 99–144.
15The profound distrust of all foreigners is stressed by Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (London, 1929), II, 9; 11, 23.
16This is admitted even by Wilhelm Liebknecht in his reminiscences *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis* (Nürnberg, 1896), 41.
hardly any English and for a long time, naturally, his thick foreign accent was quite a handicap. No wonder, then, that in the 1850's, notwithstanding some contacts with Chartist leaders like Ernest Jones or such political outsiders as the anti-Russian fanatic David Urquhart, Marx lacked virtually all political influence.\textsuperscript{17}

Inevitably, the question arises why Marx, under such circumstances, should have stayed in Britain. Why did he not act like thousands upon thousands of other emigrés who left Britain to go overseas, as soon as their hopes for an early return to their native lands began to fade? The answer cannot be in doubt. He did not leave Britain because—at a time when overseas transportation was slow and distances still loomed large—this would have removed him, for all practical purposes, from the European political scene or at least prevented his prompt return on the outbreak of a new revolution. From hundreds of letters we know how passionately he longed to return to Germany to take a leading part in a renewed revolution and how indefatigable he was in finding new reasons why an outbreak was soon bound to occur.\textsuperscript{18} No matter how often he was disappointed by the turn of events or how unmercifully he was taunted about countless predictions gone wrong—through most of the decade he never gave up hope nor his determination to plunge right back into the struggle.

However, with each passing year he was increasingly preoccupied with one problem. Only in Germany did he have a number of devoted followers, the nucleus of a political party. All the more was he haunted by the fear that his prolonged absence from the German scene would fatally undermine his political prestige as a leader so that, when at long last the hour of return struck, even his admirers might be listening to his rivals and the general public would have forgotten his very name. How could such a disaster be prevented? For a man of erudition and literary talent the answer seemed clear: only the authorship of impressive works could keep his name in the public eye and increase his prestige even in his absence. That road, however, appeared to be blocked by his old foes, the German governments which, after the vicissitudes of the Revolution, were back in power and more vindictive than ever. Under such circumstances, what chance did he stand as an author to get through to German readers?

He tried hard and often. Even before emigrating to Britain he had conceived a plan for a new German periodical; in London, he plunged into this project with energy, ingenuity, and no great qualms.\textsuperscript{19} Up to a point, his efforts were successful: after a considerable delay—which was partly due to Marx's own habitual tardiness—a magazine \textit{Neue Rheinische Zeitung (Revue)} appeared in Hamburg, then not part of Prussia but occupied by Prussian troops. However, difficulties immediately appeared and kept piling up. The bookseller who produced the magazine either did not care much about

\textsuperscript{17}For many details see the authoritative work \textit{Karl Marx: Chronik seines Lebens in Einzeldaten} (Moscow, 1934), esp. 143-45. This work (henceforth quoted as \textit{Chronik}) was compiled in the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institut.

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Chronik}, 85 and 92.

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Chronik}, 77. See also Marx's letter to Engels of August 23, 1849 (In MEGA).
it or was afraid of the occupation authorities; in any case he was ineffectual.20
All told, only 6 issues appeared before the Revue ceased publication.

Not much later there was the "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." Not only was it created under appalling personal circumstances but it nearly remained unpublished! For lack of money the weekly in which Marx's friend Weydemeyer planned to publish it in New York had to be discontinued after the first issue; and it was only due to the generosity of a German emigrant that the literary masterpiece was published at all.21 But that was not the end of the trouble, because even the more radical booksellers in Germany did not dare carry this kind of "untimely" publication. An English translation that had been made could not be printed. An even worse fate befell a pamphlet titled "Revelations of the Cologne Trial of Communists," in which Marx exposed the police forgeries used by the Public Prosecutor against his supporters in the Rhineland.22 The pamphlet was to be published in Switzerland. Assuming that part of the edition might be confiscated when smuggled across the border, the publisher printed 2000 copies; however, this calculation proved to be overly sanguine: the whole edition fell prey to the police.

A more cruel and complete frustration may be difficult to imagine. Yet there is the unsavory affair of Colonel Bangya.23 To cut a long story short, Marx was taken in by a Hungarian stool-pigeon who induced him to write a pamphlet which was to be published anonymously. It was, instead, apparently sold by Bangya to his paymasters and ended up in the archives of the Prussian or some other police.

The upshot of all this was that hard work, painful personal sacrifices, and, in the case of the "18th Brumaire," superb literary achievement had failed to yield any appreciable result—either financially, or politically, or for Marx's personal prestige. Under such circumstances it obviously made no sense to have books printed abroad; there just was no substitute for the legitimate German publisher and bookseller—who was still under the thumb of censorship and police.

Was there really no way out? Was it impossible for him to write something or re-use some older material and have it legally published in Germany? He had a number of projects in mind, the most important of which was a voluminous work on Political Economy. As a matter of fact, the plan was anything but new; as early as 1845 he had talked about it and even entered into an agreement with a publisher.24 By 1850 many friends and followers had heard of the great work to come and, in view of the author's indubitale brilliance, looked forward to it with keen anticipation. Encouraged by urgent pleas to finish his "eagerly expected" book,25 Marx, in September 1850, really resumed his study of economic theory, a subject whose difficulties he still vastly underrated. A few months later, he asked two friends in Germany to help him find a publisher. Soon he heard that the well-known firm of Cotta had refused.26 In the following months the prospect of finding a publisher went

20Chronik, 78-84. 21Mehring's biography, 213-18; Chronik, 116. 22Mehring, 218-24.
23Chronik, 118-31. See also the biography by E. H. Carr, Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism (London, 1934), 139-40.
24Chronik, 26,29-32. 25Ibid., 105. 26Ibid., 105.
from bad to worse; for the arrest of a number of his friends in the Rhineland and the discovery of incriminating material had made him even more odious to the authorities. The result was that Marx kept asking friends and supporters to find him a publisher in Germany, either for his “Political Economy” or for any of his minor projects; but although several of these men did their best, all the publishers contacted refused, broadly hinting at the “risk one would take toward the government.” 27 Also the booksellers were scared to carry any work by Marx as “the name alone was sufficient to get them into an awful lot of trouble.” 28

Thus one can only concur with the knowledgeable Franz Mehring: that “the German book trade was closed to men like Marx and Engels. Even the publishers who mouthed the most radical phrases were sincerely horrified at the ‘untimely’ proposal to print their works.” 29 Finally, in 1852, discouraged by the total lack of prospects, Marx stopped working on his book—an interruption that was to last no less than four years!

When in the fall of 1856 he resumed the work on his “Political Economy,” his revived interest was essentially due to a changed situation. On the one hand, there were many indications that the oft-predicted economic crisis with its fascinating political implications was now near. On the other hand, his old fear that rivals might usurp the leadership of the coming revolution was aroused more than ever before, and toward the end of the decade it became obsessive. In France his old rival P. J. Proudhon was very much in the limelight and presented, together with disciples like the economist Alfred Darimon, a definite danger. Indeed, it seems to have been the news that a German translation of Proudhon’s “Manuel du Spéculateur à la Bourse” was about to appear that provided the impetus for Marx to start really writing his book, and, more specifically, to begin with the chapter on money. How much the danger of Proudhonism was on Marx’s mind is clear from this boast made just before the actual publication of the Critique: “... in these two chapters the foundation is also destroyed of the Proudhonism now fashionable in France....” 30

But what incensed Marx infinitely more were the manifold activities and the rising political star of Ferdinand Lassalle, whom by that time he had come to hate as his most dangerous rival. However, well aware of Lassalle’s proven usefulness, Marx generally concealed his feelings and put on a show of friendliness, pouring out his bitter enmity only in letters to Engels. 31 Ironically, Lassalle, who for all his faults was neither petty-minded nor overly suspicious, kept urging Marx to finish his “Political Economy”—blindly unaware that it had become one of the main purposes of the book to establish

27 Ibid., 121.
28 This was the report of Marx’s follower Naut in Cologne. Chronik, 127.
29 Geschichte der deutschen Sozialdemokratie, II, 237.
30 Marx’s letter to Weydemeyer of Feb. 1, 1958, tran. in Marx and Engels: Selected Correspondence (New York, 1942), 119.
31 For a fairly thorough presentation of Marx’s changing relationship with Lassalle, see the Introduction by Gustav Mayer to the Marx-Lassalle correspondence, in Ferdinand Lassalle: Nachgelassene Briefe und Schriften, vol. III (Berlin, 1922).
Thus it was a strange mixture of motives that worked on Marx when he resumed his theoretical studies. This time there was no turning back from his work; having started in September 1856, he kept at it all through the next year. In April 1857 he began the chapter on capital; in spring and summer he concentrated on economic theory, but from October 1857 to January 1858 we find him dividing his attention between theoretical studies and the development of the economic crisis which now was arousing his passionate interest. In a most revealing way, the crisis itself increased his eagerness to finish his manuscript. On December 18 he confided to Engels:

I am working enormously, mostly till 4 a.m. The job is twofold: 1. to lay down the outlines of my “Economy” (it being absolutely necessary, for the public, to get to the bottom of this thing, and, for myself, individually, to get rid of this nightmare.)

2. the present crisis. On this, except for the articles for the “Tribune,” I only keep book but this takes up a good deal of time. I envisage that about spring the two of us shall do a pamphlet on this story, thereby re-announcing to the German public that we are again and still there, always the same.

This passage, together with some other letters, clearly shows how keenly the friends were anticipating their return to a Germany in turmoil; in which case obviously every finished manuscript could not only be printed without hindrance but would be potent ammunition in the inevitable struggle for the top spot.

In the last weeks of 1857 and the first weeks of the new year, the excitement of the friends reaches its climax. But soon a sour note is heard from Manchester. Engels, always in close touch with the textile industry, reports some deeply disturbing news: both prices and employment are rising! At first, Marx tries to find an optimistic explanation for this “lull in the crises”; but soon thereafter it becomes all too clear that a very mild crisis has come and gone—to give way to a new wave of prosperity; there have been no revolutionary repercussions at all!

But if politically 1858 was a bad year for Marx, full of disillusionment and bitter frustration, it brought real compensation to the author. In February when his revolutionary hopes began to wane, he received word from Lassalle offering his best efforts to find a publisher for the “Political Economy.” This promise was all the more astounding since Lassalle himself had just emerged from a protracted struggle against the Prussian bureaucracy and police, who wanted to deny the still suspect revolutionary of 1848 even a temporary permit to stay in Berlin; it had taken all of his persistence, ingenuity, and tactical talents to obtain a six months’ residence permit—given on condition that he in no way engage in politics! But boldly ignoring his

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33Chronik, 163.
34Letter to Engels, Dec. 18, 1857 (my translation).
35Marx’s letters to Engels, Jan. 7 and Feb. 14, 1858; Engels’ letter, Feb. 11.
37For details see vol. II of Ferdinand Lassalle: Nachgelassene Briefe und Schriften.
own precarious position, he promptly tried to help the exile in London whom he still mistook for his friend; he would use his manifold connections to find him a publisher. And although Marx was once again in a towering rage about all Lassalle might say, write, or do, he immediately grasped the importance of the offer and soon accepted. Lassalle proved as good as his word by obtaining a definite agreement with the respected publisher Franz Duncker. This achievement so impressed Marx that he later grudgingly admitted: "It was only thanks to Lassalle's extraordinary powers of persuasion that Duncker has been persuaded to take this step." Thus Marx, all of a sudden, after many years of fruitless efforts, had the opportunity of reappearing legally as a German author. What a change and what a chance!

But the precious possibility of success lay almost buried among dangers. In view of the author's reputation, censors were sure to scrutinize the book and to confiscate it promptly if they could find some plausible reason, especially anything that could be construed as an incitement to class hatred or any advocacy, no matter how subtle, of revolution. Therefore, to get by the Prussian authorities, the book would have to appear both erudite and politically bland. But if it thus avoided the Scylla of confiscation, would it not come terribly close to the Charybdis of disappointing his followers, scaring away or boring the public, and ending up as a political and financial failure? For a man in Marx's situation the risks were appalling. One thing, however, was clear: by far the worst of all dangers was the wrath of the Prussian government; for if the book were confiscated, not only his present efforts would be wasted but his prospects of finding another German publisher would, for the foreseeable future, be nil. Conversely, if he managed to get by the Prussians this time, it might mean a decisive turn for the better; for no longer would he be regarded as a pariah by the official world and as a hopeless case by the publishers; thus, he might achieve more freedom of action later. Therefore the goal of gaining a new legal foothold as a German author assumed overriding importance; and Marx, notwithstanding his desperate economic plight, instructed Lassalle not to jeopardize by financial demands the chance of getting a publisher. If need be, he was ready to forego any fee, at least at the beginning. If the German publication proved a success, he wrote to Engels, there might be an English translation and London authors usually received real money. Thus, in more than one way he thought of his book as the thin end of a wedge.

It was in this frame of mind that Marx conceived the plan to publish the work in instalments. This procedure offered several advantages. To begin with, there was the ugly but vital fact that although he had talked about a Political Economy ever since 1846 and had done a good deal of preparatory work, yet in February 1858 when Lassalle contacted Duncker, such manuscripts as existed were at best in an intermediary stage. Under these circum-

38 Marx's letters to Lassalle, Feb. 22, 1858, and to Engels, the same day.
39 Letter to Weydemeyer of Feb. 1, 1859, tran. in Marx and Engels: Selected Correspondence, 119. See also a letter of Jenny Marx to Engels, April 9, 1858, with the malicious praise of the "little Jew in Berlin" who "had managed cleverly."
40 Letter to Lassalle, March 11, 1859.
41 Letter to Engels, Jan. 21, 1859.
42 Letters to Engels, March 29 and to Lassalle, Feb. 22, 1858.
43 Marx's letter to Lassalle, March 11, 1858.
stances he realized he would have neither time nor money to finish the whole work in a set span of time and therefore deemed it expedient to publish it in instalments.

But the plan to publish separate parts also limited the risks, for both author and publisher, in case of confiscation; and above all it enabled Marx to start out with an instalment so scholarly and innocuous that it could pass even the closest scrutiny by censors.\textsuperscript{44} Thereafter, once the initial suspicion was at least partly overcome, he could become bolder; for obviously it would be awkward for the authorities to suppress the continuation of a work that had seemed acceptable and had meanwhile aroused some interest among the public.

Are we only imputing such motives and sly considerations? In January 1859 Marx greatly surprised Engels with the news\textsuperscript{45} that the first two chapters did not yet contain anything on capital but dealt solely with money and commodities. Then he went on:

This is good for a twofold reason. If the thing’s a hit, the chapter on capital can follow fast. Secondly, as in the published part, by the very nature of the thing, the fellows cannot limit their criticism merely to biased abuse and the whole thing looks exceedingly serious and scholarly, I compel that rabble later to take my views on capital rather seriously. Besides, I think that, apart from all practical purposes, the chapter on money will be interesting to experts.

The same clever plan was revealed to Lassalle with the added remark that Marx deemed it “expedient for political reasons; for with chapter 3 the real battle begins and it did not seem advisable to frighten right at the start.”\textsuperscript{46} Somewhat later he even informed Lassalle that the next instalments would have a “directly revolutionary task.”\textsuperscript{47} But there would be no “next instalments” if the first one were confiscated; therefore utmost caution was called for. “The presentation, I mean the manner, is quite scholarly, i.e. not contrary to police regulations in the ordinary sense,” he had assured Lassalle in another letter.\textsuperscript{48}

But notwithstanding these precautions, Marx himself remained full of misgivings and extremely nervous—a condition which even the Prussian elections in the fall of 1858 and the more liberal Cabinet did not improve. Although the sanguine Engels sought to comfort his morose friend and once again urged him to hurry and finish his manuscript, he took his time—no less than another three months!—and when he finally did send off his manuscript, he was in a state of extreme irritability and excitement, haunted by misgivings about a possible confiscation or even mutilation of the manuscript by Prussian officials and about the fate of the printed work.\textsuperscript{49} Was there nothing further he could do to protect it?

It was under these circumstances and in a condition of morbid fear that Marx, in February 1859, wrote the “Preface.” The normal uses of a preface

\textsuperscript{44}How much the danger of confiscation haunted Marx’s mind can be seen especially in his letters to Lassalle, Feb. 22 and March 11, 1858; also from Engels’ letter to Marx, Oct. 1858.
\textsuperscript{45}Letter to Engels, Jan. 15, 1959. The passage is difficult to translate.
\textsuperscript{46}Letter to Lassalle, March 28, 1859. (Italics in the original).
\textsuperscript{47}Letter to Lassalle, Sept. 15, 1860.
\textsuperscript{48}Letter to Lassalle, Feb. 22, 1858.
\textsuperscript{49}Letters to Engels, Feb. 2, 8, 9, 1859; letter to Lassalle, Feb. 2, 1859.
are well known. But for authors working under persecution or oppression it has often possessed an additional precious quality: it is that part of their work that is sure to catch the censor’s eye and to be read by even the laziest of these officials. Therefore it is highly suitable for a “captatio benevolentiae,” i.e. anything that might ingratiate the writer to the high and mighty or at least make his intentions appear in a favorable light. Of such possibilities men like Marx and Engels were, of course, aware. Thus Marx, who in the formulation of ambiguous statements was as skillful as the Delphi oracle, occasionally instructed his friend on how to protect a series of articles he was writing on the organization of the Prussian army.50

As to your misgivings about confiscation, you must introduce the first article with a preface to the effect that you first want to consider the matter from the military standpoint; secondly, want to criticize the bourgeoisie; thirdly, the Reaction, et cetera, and the position of the workers party on this question, et cetera—and here, in a few strokes, the bias can be outlined or hinted at. This will, at the outset, make confiscation more difficult to the government.

In view of the background of the Critique and Marx’s haunting fear that his work might be suppressed, one cannot really imagine him passing up the opportunity of designing the “Preface” above all to ward off the danger of confiscation. This, of course, would in no way preclude the possibility that it would also be used for more customary ends, e.g. to set forth the general plan of the book, its interest for prospective readers, etc. Further, the author might well be tempted to drop some special hints to his political sympathizers; but this would not be easy since anything likely to kindle their enthusiasm was even more likely to arouse the censor’s suspicion; therefore he would have to tread warily. Indeed, formulating passages that have to serve different and sometimes contradictory ends is always, as politicians know, like walking a tightrope: an act requiring both talent and training. Marx no doubt possessed both. Therefore only slow and careful reading of the “Preface,” with constant awareness of the author’s situation and the ends to be served, can give us an adequate understanding.

The “Preface” consists essentially of two rather heterogeneous parts insofar as the autobiographical sketch, which takes up over half the length, provides the framework for the presentation of Marx’s interpretation of history. Let us glance at the autobiographical part first.

Most of Marx’s statements on the phases of his development are not only factually correct but sometimes give the impression of surprising honesty and frankness. Thus he speaks freely of his early clashes with the authorities in the Rhineland, his joint authorship of the Communist Manifesto, and even his editorship of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung. But this frankness, far from being unwise, was deliberate and well calculated. Fully aware of the file which Herr Wilhelm Stieber, the notorious police chief, had amassed on him, Marx recognized the futility of trying to hide what was known anyway. Even in Prussian eyes, apparent frankness would increase his credibility and make a better impression. At the same time, however, every mention of the glorious old battles would strengthen the bond between the author and his political

50Letter to Engels, Jan. 30, 1865. Also the further tactical considerations are illuminating.
followers: here was a book by their old leader! Thus he was killing two birds with one stone.

Yet the biographical part is by no means all frankness and honesty! In the last two paragraphs which deal with the decade of the 1850's there is a twist. First, in describing the resumption of his economic studies in London, Marx lists the various factors which "determined" him "to begin afresh from the very beginning and to work through the new material critically." He does not say that this meant a break with his former convictions, but does he not intend to suggest it? Clearly disingenuous, however, is the apparent pride with which he mentions his "contributions, during 8 years now, to the first English-American newspaper, the New York Tribune"—a paper which he really loathed and despised.51 But was not the mere fact that he had been working for such a respectable and far from revolutionary paper likely to impress Prussian officials as a sign that, like so many former revolutionaries who later had "gone straight," this former Bohemian and revolutionary firebrand had changed and settled down to a life of hard work for a decent foreign paper and to serious studies?

But all this leads up to the climax at the end of the "Preface." Having introduced his work as "the result of conscientious investigation lasting many years," Marx strikes a heroic pose, solemnly declaring that "at the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell, the demand must be posted:

Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto,
Ogni vilta convien che qui sia morta."

Thus the book whose various "practical purposes" Marx had so freely discussed with Engels and others was with utmost solemnity presented as dedicated to nothing but the search for truth! What a brilliant and brazen maneuver! While many another suspected author had tried to protect his work by stressing its scholarly merits, who but Marx possessed enough skill, erudition, and daring to do it in so grand a style—quoting Dante's immortal verse in the original?

Turning now to the famous center-piece, we ask whether the presentation of Marx's conception of history was significantly influenced by the ulterior purposes of the Critique. We can decide this question by first comparing the formulation in the "Preface" with pertinent statements made when Marx had no reason to fear censorship or similar dangers; then by examining whether such deviations as may be found appear well suited to dispel a watchful censor's suspicion.

A study of the interpretation of history in the "Preface" reveals a curious parallel with the autobiographical part. There Marx started out by stating nothing but the facts, then gradually shifted to a more slanted presentation, and finally mixed facts with fiction; similarly, about the first half of the presentation of his conception of history contains only thoughts which he had repeatedly and more fully expressed earlier when writing without any fear of the censor. In the first four sentences of the statement52 he outlines the result of his early investigations and describes the relations between the economic

52 The sentences begin with "In the social production" and end with "their consciousness."
basis of society and the legal and political super-structure. These sentences contain nothing Marx had not said before under different circumstances, especially in his "German Ideology" and in the "18th Brumaire."53 Nor was there in the nature of the problems anything to provoke even the most suspicious censor. Hence, these sentences are to be taken as the unadulterated expression of ideas whose gradual development has been traced very far back—indeed, to an essay written right before Marx graduated from grammar school.54 However, a different standard must be applied to the sentences, covering about one page, that deal with the "social revolution," which begins when, "at a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come into conflict... with the existing property relations...." Here was treacherous ground and utmost caution was called for; indeed, the mere use of a term like "social revolution" was sure to electrify the censor! But immediately the author proceeds with superb skill to explain that the kind of revolution he has in mind neither can be prevented nor does it involve any immediate danger. The whole description sounds strangely abstract, remote, recondite, yet reassuring. Is it not wonderfully comforting to know that "no social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve." Neither in this passage nor in the rest of the discussion is the ugly word "class" ever used, nor is there any hint that in the "social revolution" violence may play a part!

But did this deterministic and optimistic theory reflect the author's real thought? In his earlier writings—especially the German Ideology—the passages about forces of production and relations of production were generally accompanied or followed by a forceful presentation of the fundamental role of classes and the class struggle, and the demand for and prediction of the violent overthrow of the existing class society. Thus a characteristic passage in the German Ideology runs as follows:55

In the development of the productive forces a stage is reached where productive forces and means of intercourse are called into being which, under the existing relations, can only work mischief, and which are, therefore, no longer productive but destructive, forces (machinery and money). Associated with this is the emergence of a class which has to bear all the burdens of society and is forced into the most resolute opposition to all other classes; a class which comprises the majority of the members of society and in which there develops a consciousness of the need for a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness.

And a little further down, the author sets forth that "every revolutionary struggle is directed against the class which has so far been dominant" and that the communist revolution will abolish "all class rule along with the classes themselves."

53In The German Ideology there are several pertinent and in part brilliant passages. In the English edition (New York, 1947), see esp. 13–15; 38; 70–72. Neither The German Ideology nor the 18th Brumaire was written under conditions in which the author had to feel the censor peering over his shoulder.

54Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station (New York, 1940; 1953), III.

55German Ideology, 58–59.
Compared with such passages in the earlier works, the treatment in the "Preface" appears as so completely emasculated that only the question remains whether Marx might perhaps have changed his opinions in the meantime. However, any such hypothesis can be given short shrift; for in the same year as the Critique there appeared in a London German-language paper, Das Volk, an inflammatory article that ended as follows:

The need for and the inevitability of a revolution are as general as the despair of the downtrodden people, as the hatred of the plundered proletarians. Only when the revolution has become an elemental force, incalculable and inevitable like the lightning whose thunder you do not hear before its fatal bolt has been shot, only then is its outbreak certain. When and how this may occur matters little. This time it seems to be Prussia's turn. 56

In view of this piece of uninhibited demagoguery from Marx's pen and the wealth of other material attesting his life-long revolutionary zeal, it would defy all common sense to believe that he could have indulged in the naive and rosy optimism shown in the passage from the "Preface." 57 Conversely, the real purpose of those glib phrases becomes quite transparent from the circumstances in which the book was written. What was urgently needed was some wool to pull over the eyes of the Prussian authorities! And in this respect the "Preface," together with the clever arrangement of the material, proved effective: the Critique was neither prohibited nor confiscated so that the author had indeed regained legal access to the German public!

However, this victory was dearly bought. On the book market, the Critique was a failure, which, in view of its dry topic and abstract tone, was small wonder. 58 The hopes for English translation never materialized in Marx's lifetime. Some of his staunchest followers in Germany expressed their bewilderment and bitter disappointment because they failed to see in what way their leader's work could advance the common cause. 59 But the heaviest penalty Marx had to pay for his prevarication lay in the permanent effect of the "Preface." For whereas the book proper found only few readers, the "Preface" came to be regarded as the "classical formulation" of the economic interpretation of history and was studied and quoted all over the globe. And since the author—lest he destroy his own credibility and jeopardize his followers in Germany 60 and other countries—could not deny, revoke, or explain away what he had written, he had no way of preventing the high-sounding phrases from obscuring and obfuscating his real goals for generations to come.

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56 Das Volk (London, 1859), No. 8. I first saw this article when, as a student, I worked in the Archives of the SPD in Berlin.

57 The existence of certain discrepancies, even in those writings that were not influenced by Marx's fear of the censor, cannot, for obvious reasons, be discussed in this framework.

58 See Marx's complaints about the way his work was being ignored in Germany in his letters to Lassalle, "early July" and Nov. 6, 1859.

59 Marx's letter to Engels, July 22, 1859.

60 In Germany Marx's followers were in danger even after the Reich was created. For an eye-opener in this respect, see the book: Der Hochverratsprozess wider Liebknecht, Bebel, Hepner vor dem Schwurgericht zu Leipzig vom. 11. bis 26. März 1872 (Berlin, 1894).