

Preface to the Third German Edition of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte^[39]

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Transcribed: by Mike Bessler.

The fact that a new edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* has become necessary, thirty-three years after its first appearance, proves that even today this little book has lost none of its value.

It was in truth a work of genius. Immediately after the event that struck the whole political world like a thunderbolt from the blue, that was condemned by some with loud cries of moral indignation and accepted by others as salvation from the revolution and as punishment for its errors, but was only wondered at by all and understood by none—immediately after this event Marx came out with a concise, epigrammatic exposition that laid bare the whole course of French history since the February days in its inner interconnection, reduced the miracle of December 2^[40] to a natural, necessary result of this interconnection and in so doing did not even need to treat the hero of the coup d'état otherwise than with the contempt he so well deserved. And the picture was drawn with such a master hand that every fresh disclosure since made has only provided fresh proofs of how faithfully it reflected reality. This eminent understanding of the living history of the day, this clear-sighted appreciation of events at the moment of happening, is indeed without parallel.

But for this, Marx's thorough knowledge of French history was needed. France is the land where, more than anywhere else, the historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision, and where, consequently, the changing political forms within which they move and in which their results are summarised have been stamped in the sharpest outlines. The centre of feudalism in the Middle Ages, the model country of unified monarchy, resting on estates, since the Renaissance,^[41] France demolished feudalism in the Great Revolution and established the unalloyed rule of the bourgeoisie in a classical purity unequalled by any other European land. And the struggle of the upward-striving proletariat against the ruling bourgeoisie appeared here in an acute form unknown elsewhere. This was the reason why Marx not only studied the past history of France with particular predilection, but also followed her current history in every detail, stored up the material for future use and, consequently, events never took him by surprise.

In addition, however, there was still another circumstance. It was precisely Marx who had first discovered the great law of motion of history, the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes, and that the existence and thereby the collisions, too, between these classes are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of their production and of their exchange determined by it. This law, which has the same significance for history as the law of the transformation of energy has for natural science - this law gave him here, too, the key to an understanding of the history of the Second French Republic.^[42] He put his law to the test on these historical events, and even after thirty-three years we must still say that it has stood the test brilliantly.

Frederick Engels

Footnotes

39 This work, written on the basis of a concrete analysis of the revolutionary events in France from 1848 to 1851, is one of the most important Marxist writings. In it Marx gives a further elaboration of all the basic tenets of historical materialism—the theory of the class struggle and proletarian revolution, the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Of extremely great importance is the conclusion which Marx arrived at on the question of the attitude of the proletariat to the bourgeois state. He says, “All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it” (see p. 171 of this volume). Lenin described it as one of the most important propositions in the Marxist teaching on the state.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx continued his analysis of the question of the peasantry, as a potential ally of the working class in the imminent revolution, outlined the role of the political parties in the life of society and exposed for what they were the essential features of Bonapartism. — 95, 97

40 On December 2, 1851 a counter-revolutionary coup d'état in France was carried out by Louis Bonaparte and his adherents. — 95, 99, 120, 254, 264, 287, 393, 653.

41 Renaissance—a period in the cultural and ideological development of a number of countries in Western and Central Europe called forth by the emergence of capitalist relations, which covers the second half of the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. This period is usually associated with a rapid development in the arts and sciences and the revival of interest in the culture of classical Greece and Rome (hence the name of the period). For Engels's description of the Renaissance see his “Introduction to Dialectics of Nature” (pp. 342-44) of this volume. — 95, 628

42 The Second Republic existed in France from 1848 to 1852. For Marx's description of this period see *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. — 96

