MARXIST HISTORY
AND AUSTRALIAN
POLITICAL
MOVEMENTS
Ann Curthoys

Another example might be one's understanding of the ALP and of Labor governments. What changes one judges to be possible through the ALP, or through this present Federal Labor government, will be affected by one's knowledge of the complex forces producing the ALP and the Labor government, of the political and ideological traditions which compose it. That is, while we cannot simply translate the practices of the past onto the present, we are better equipped to deal with this government if we know something of the ALP and Labor government history, of the contradictory forces such governments typically encounter and help to produce. Of course different people, and different groups of people, draw different conclusions from past events. This is true of both the examples I've between class and culture, and social relationships. One of the most difficult aspects of Marx's theory of history is the problem concerning his rock-bottom explanation of just why change occurs. One can argue, for example, whether his view rests ultimately on some kind of technological determinism, some inexorable change in the forces of production which throw up, after a struggle, new relations of production, and hence new social, political, legal, and ideological forms. In considering these questions, his theoretical writings, such as Capital, the German Ideology, and the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy, are very important, and many many words have been spoken and written on these and similar writings and the arguments contained in them.

But there is another way of looking at what Marx had to say about historical change. This is to look at how he himself wrote history. I'm thinking here not of those works where he tried to write about the whole of human history, defining major epochs and how one developed out of another. Such a project is of necessity very abstract, very general. I'm thinking rather of those occasions where Marx set about analysing brief and particular events, that had only recently occurred. These were mainly about French political upheavals — the revolution of 1848, the restoration of autocratic power in 1851, the Paris Commune of 1871.

In these works, Marx attempted to put his general conception of history to particular use, to explain why things happened as they did in those very stormy years. In them we see his general theories coming to ground as it were; we can see how Marx himself thought specific histories could be written. They are somewhat difficult to read today, for they involve a wealth of detail about events about which most of us know very little. Nevertheless they are still important works for us to take into account, for they provide a kind of model of Marxist historical analysis in practice.

So, how did Marx write history? What, if anything, can we still learn from these histories, a century after Marx's death?

I'd like to begin with four very well known quotations from Marx.

First, on history:
People make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past.

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Then, on Social Democracy:

The peculiar character of Social Democracy is epitomised in the fact that democratic republican institutions are demanded not as a means of doing away with both the extremes, capital and wage labour, but of weakening their antagonism, and transforming it into harmony.

Finally, on class:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life and their culture from those of other classes, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among them, and the identity of their interests begets no unity, no political organisation, they do not form a class.

All four of these quotations come
September 1931. The Nazis have won power in the Thuringian Government and Hitler celebrates. Their supremacy in Germany is eighteen months ahead. In the 18th Brumaire Marx's approach is useful for understanding the development of fascism is the 20th century.

from one text, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte, written by Marx in 1852 about events in France that occurred between 1848 and 1851.

I consider this to be a very significant piece of historical writing, one that still repays close attention. I do not mean this in the sense that it is a perfect text, unable to be questioned, modified, or opposed, but in the sense that it demonstrates a way of understanding history that is still useful to us today.

What I want to do now is to say why I find this particular piece of work by Marx to be inspiring, and then to say something about its relevance to current political issues in Australia today, and to attempts to understand Australian history. To do this I'll first need to give the bare bones of the story Marx tells. I'll be as brief as possible, as my point is less about the content of his analysis and more about its method. But I will need to go back to mid nineteenth century France for a moment.

THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE
In February 1848, the ruling monarch in France, King Louis Phillips, was overthrown. The rigidity of his political regime, which had been designed to fend off all change even of a liberal democratic kind, left even the most moderate of the opposition no choice other than revolution. The depression of the 1840s seemed to provide further proof of the incapacity of the old order. The people mounted the barricades, the police and the army offered no serious resistance, and the monarch ran away.

A new parliamentary regime was established instead, and less than three months after the departure of the King, the newly elected parliament, the National Assembly, met. This inaugurated the new republic. As Marx put it, whereas before 1848 a limited section of the bourgeoisie ruled in the name of the King, after May 1848 the whole of the bourgeoisie sought to rule in the name of the people.

Then in June, the Paris workers rebelled, realising that the revolution which they had helped to achieve was in fact producing only a new form of bourgeois rule. Their street demonstrations were quelled in a bloody battle and the workers were soundly defeated. For they had arrayed against them all other classes — the financial and industrial bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class, the army, the intellectuals and the clergy, and the peasants. After this more than 3,000 of the insurgents were killed, and another 15,000 transported without trial. All other classes united against the working class under the banner of
"Property, Family, Religion, Order". From that point onwards, the dominant conflict occurred within all the forces which had united to defeat the June insurrection.

A new constitution was drafted, guaranteeing universal male suffrage, and various liberal democratic rights — freedom of the press, of speech, of association, of assembly, of education, and religion. Under this new Constitution, the President was to be elected directly by the people. In the subsequent elections, on 10 December 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was elected President, and the Royalists, known as the Party of Order, won a majority of seats in the Assembly. The Party of Order was in fact divided into two factions — those who were the spokesmen of large landed property, and those who represented financial and industrial capital. The paradox was that a parliamentary republic suited these Royalists, these supporters of a monarchy, because whereas under the old regime these two factions had opposed each other, whereas under the old regime these supporters of a monarchy, because whereas under the old regime these two factions had opposed each other, now in the new parliament they could unite.

Against the Royalist majority were the Opposition in parliament, the largest group being the Social Democrats, which also represented a class alliance, this time between the petty bourgeoisie and the working class. In this alliance the ideas of the petty bourgeoisie were dominant. The Royalist majority now wanted to crush the petty bourgeoisie as it had crushed the workers in June. There were several stages to this, but the decisive one occurred just after the Social Democrats had done extremely well in the by-elections of March 1850. In anger, the Royalists used their parliamentary majority to amend the electoral law to make three years residence in an electorate a condition for voting, thereby removing the vote from three million of the 10 million voters, mainly working class and petty bourgeoisie.

Further when the President acted unconstitutionally in authorising a military attack on Rome without Assembly consent, the Royalists endorsed his action, thus revealing little respect for the constitution and the rights of parliament.

But the Royalist victory over the Social Democrats was to prove a Pyrrhic one. Their own days were numbered. They had undermined the credibility of parliament and much of its support, flouted their own constitution, and thereby enhanced the personal role of the President, Napoleon Bonaparte, and also the role of the army as a guarantee of order. Bonaparte was not slow to seize on the benefits for him of this situation. One of his strategies was to build up a kind of private personal army, composed of people drawn from what Marx calls the lumpenproletariat. Another tactic was to change the ministry frequently, so that it consisted of ever more insignificant individuals, the better so as to exert his personal control over them. To counter Bonaparte's daily growing power, the Party of Order, says Marx, needed to have united with the Social Democrats to strengthen parliament itself, and to have maintained parliamentary control of the army. Both of these they refused to do. They failed to realise that a parliamentary majority is not always the same thing as effective power; they lost, says Marx, "all understanding of the rude external world". The years 1850 and 1851 were dominated by innumerable squabbles and petty intrigues, as the Party of Order and Bonaparte competed for the political control of France.

In this situation, the Royalist majority began to disintegrate within itself. The two different Royalist factions split, and each side further subdivided. As a result the Royalists, the political representatives of the various sections of capital, lost the support of their own class. Both financial and industrial capital were disturbed by the Party of Order's squabbles and incompetence, fearing that political instability would damage the economy. They blamed the minor recession of 1851 on this political instability. As an alternative they looked to Bonaparte as the sole source of political unity and stability. As Marx put it, "Despotism or anarchy. Naturally, it (the bourgeoisie) voted for despotism".

But Bonaparte had other sources of support as well, in particular the peasants, still the mass of the people. The peasants were not a self-conscious class, and did not have their own political representatives. They looked, rather, for protection from other classes and switched their allegiance from the Royalists to Bonaparte.

The mistake of the Party of Order had been to undermine parliament itself, its only real base for united action. It had flouted the constitution, rejected petty bourgeois and working class participation in parliament, and failed to control the army. In the end the role of parliament as a power base for the bourgeoisie had been so weakened, that in December 1851, the Party of Order had no alternative but to acquiesce in the election of Bonaparte as the supreme source of power, and acquiesce in the dissolution of Parliament itself. Bonaparte then tried to maintain his central authoritarian power by appearing, as Marx says, the "patriarchal benefactor of all classes". But, says Marx in conclusion, he cannot give to one class without taking away from another. At this point the story ends.

Well, how do we assess this work? First, it gives the lie to the claim that Marxist history is necessarily abstract, unable to deal with individuals in all their complexity. The personalities of the chief actors in this drama are all dealt with, but in the context of wider social forces.
cretinism, which leads them in directions their supporters may not wish to follow. They may also fail to realise that their rule by parliamentary means depends on their capacity to contain their opponents, to maintain appearances of legitimacy. If they exclude certain classes from political representation, as the Party of Order sought to exclude the Social Democrats and thereby the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, the latter classes may join with other forces to defeat the bourgeoisie parliamentary leaders. The Social Democrats, in their turn, have a complex relations with their class base of support. If they reject their working class support, as the Social Democrats did in France when the Paris workers rebelled against the new forms of parliamentary rule in June 1848, then they will themselves be weakened in any further confrontation with the political representatives of the bourgeoisie.

Third, in this analysis Marx puts forward a very detailed conception of class. Here we don’t have simply two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but a multiplicity of classes and sub-classes. The bourgeoisie itself is divided between landowners and finance and industrial capital. There are also the petty bourgeoisie, the working class, the peasants. Further some groups — the clergy, the intellectuals, the army — appear as independent forces able to be manipulated by particular classes. Various class alliances may be formed, and subsequently broken. Some classes will achieve direct political self-consciousness and organisation; others, like the peasants, will not at this stage. Indeed, Marx’s terminology can become confusing, for at times he refers to the middle class, and its not always clear who he means by this. This problem of the middle class, and its relation to the bourgeoisie and the old petty bourgeoisie, remains with us.

Fourth, I think this text suggests that Marx cannot be read, here at least, as a simple economic determinist. While he is careful to describe the economic condition of France at the time — noting that the economy was buoyant in 1850 but passing through a minor recession in 1851, he does not see the political events as a simple reflection of this economic situation. He wants to stress that at the level of politics, and at the level of class consciousness and class alliances more generally, one needs to take a longer view. How each class responds to a recession will depend on the political options at that moment open to it. The industrial bourgeoisie will desert its political leaders and support a central leader such as Bonaparte because it fears the
results of political confusion and anarchy both in boom and recession. The rise to power of a powerful ruler is not directly a result of recession, but of the inability of the various factions of the capitalist class to secure their own rule through a parliamentary democracy. And this inability flows from the complex structure of class relationships, itself a product both of economic developments and earlier political developments. The analysis of political conflicts, class alliances and economic conditions is interwoven.

Fifth, in this text Marx attempts to come to terms with the problem of the state, the implications for class struggle of the continual growth in the size, centralisation and complexity of the state machinery, the bureaucracy of government. I think he gets himself into something of a knot in this area. He wants to stress both the possibilities for the state’s independence from any specific class, and also its role as an agency of class rule, and its not quite clear where he ends up. He refers to it as “this appalling parasitic body”. At first he says that under Bonaparte, the “state seems to have made itself completely independent”. But then he immediately says, “and yet the state power is not suspended in mid air. Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small-holding peasants.” Although I don’t think the question of the state is fully resolved here, what Marx does at least indicate is the growing complexity of political rule under conditions where the state machinery itself is vast, centralised and internally complex.

To summarise then, the significance of this work now lies in its ability to place individuals within their social context, its discussion of the relations between politicians and the class or classes they aim to represent, its detailed conception of class, its denial of a simple economic determinism, and its discussion of the state.

**RELEVANCE TODAY**

**W**hat relevance is all this to us today? I’d like to talk about this at two levels—first at the level current political issues, and second at the level of historical method.

Many arguments in this text, the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, have their echoes in the present or the recent past. There is its analysis of the relationship between parliament and other forms of power. In the modern world we also need to understand the conditions under which parliament can act as a form of rule, and the conditions under which it cannot. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* helps us to see parliamentary government in true perspective. As Edmund Wilson commented:

> Never after we have read The Eighteenth Brumaire, can the language, the conventions, the combinations, the pretensions of parliamentary bodies, if we have had any illusions about them, seem the same to us again.

Following on from this, there is the trenchant analysis of Social Democracy, with its desire for harmony between Capital and Labor weakening its ability to truly confront its capitalist opponents. When these opponents, represented in this case by the Royalists, the Party of Order, acted unconstitutionally, the Social Democrats were helpless. The Fortunes of the ALP and the Labor government in the early 70s, and now in the early 1980s, can perhaps be illuminated by this kind of analysis. I am not suggesting here a simple transposition from France in 1850 to Australia in 1975 or 1983 — only that in so far as the two cases have something in common, we can find Marx’s remarks about Social Democracy unnervingly perceptive.

But I think the real importance of this text for us now lies elsewhere. It lies in suggesting the centrality of class in understanding the relationship between political struggle and economic structures and conditions. It suggests this centrality without resorting to either a simple view of class or a simple economic determinism. And this is just what I think we need today, both in developing political strategies and in developing understanding of our own history, our own past.

**POLITICAL STRUGGLE**

In terms of political struggle, we have not seen a sufficient challenge to the ideological hegemony of the forces defending capitalism. Our own social democrats, the ALP, are ever less inclined to talk about or work for socialism and the Far Left is fragmented and weak. Our class structure and relationships have been radically transformed by post-war economic, social and cultural changes, but we don’t have a ready understanding of what these class relationships now are. In modern Australia, talk about class struggle, revolution and socialism has come to seem even to many on the Left as quaint, old fashioned, irrelevant and unrealistic. In its stead we have a multiplicity of specific movements — trade union, feminist, Aboriginal, gay, ethnic, environmental, peace. This diversity is important, and inevitable, but it should not be left there. Except for the trade unions these movements are all in different ways seen by most people as having little to do with class struggle as such, as instead independent of and denying the importance of that struggle. But they all have a great deal to do with it. The case is clear enough for the trade unions, but what about the others?

Aboriginal political movements depend on an understanding of the forces which undertook and continue to oversee Aboriginal dispossession and discrimination. These forces are the forces of capitalism, with its complex set of class relationships. Aborigines are not outside these relationships. White racism, especially in country towns, has been used to argue that all whites are the same, all equally involved in Aboriginal dispossession and poverty. But its a matter of understanding the reasons for this racism and of reaching an understanding of how our specific kind of capitalism, our specific form of class society, has been built on a colonial and bloody past, the effects of which still affect the relationship between Aborigines and whites today.

I can’t go through all the others, except to say a word about feminism. Here again, the question of sexism is often taken to undermine or cut across the significance of class relationships in this society. Some argue that Marxism has proved unable to deal with this important political movement, or that in doing so it loses sight of the central question of sexist ideology and practices.

This feeling that Marxism is not able to deal theoretically with sexual division, that it is sex-blind, is currently very strong. Of the recent ALR discussions of the legacy of Marx,
Taft identifies this as a problem in Marx's work, Toni Stephens sees feminism as having no necessary class basis and as a mass democratic struggle, Julius Roe sees Marxism as unconcerned with sexism, and the struggle for socialism so far as having done little to liberate women. Further, the most recent publication from the Intervention group, Interventions after Marx, consistently argues that Marxism is of little or no value to feminists.

Marx had in fact little to say about sexual division, though he is very scathing of the conservative uses of the cry "Defend the Family" both in the Communist Manifesto and briefly in the Eighteenth Brumaire. Yet I would challenge the view that we can learn little from Marx of relevance to the struggle against sexist ideology and practice today. And that is because those ideologies and practices occur, for us, within a class society. Different social classes practise sexism differently, for different reasons, and with different effects. The fact that there are certain common elements between classes does not negate this point. As long as we have a complex class society, any movement around feminist issues becomes split by conflicting class perspectives and demands, or else represent the interests of one class only. How can it possibly be otherwise? Going back to the Eighteenth Brumaire with its concern with class formation and class alliances in daily political struggle, its implications for an understanding of modern feminism are: here we have a movement which makes possible to a limited degree a class alliance around specific issues but which is also always subject to the possibility either of fracturing, or of the hegemony of one class over another. None of this is to deny the significance of the issues with which Feminism deals, but to reassert the relevance of the Marxist tradition, both politically and theoretically, to those issues. But I can't go into this further here.

I would like to conclude by returning to the implications of Marx's own historical writings for developing our own historical interpretations today. I've suggested that the main positive inspiration we can get from the Eighteenth Brumaire is that it indicates the centrality of the notion of class relationships for understanding the relationships between political struggle, social and cultural patterns, and economic structures and conditions. We need to apply this kind of approach, in very general terms, to our own past — from the processes of destruction of Aboriginal life and dispossession, to the emergence of a parliamentary democracy, to the vast effects of the massive importation of both capital and labour via

THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR MOVEMENT AND MARX
Roger Coates

In Australia black and white societies have existed side by side, and together, intermingled, for nearly 200 years. The dominant society has been basically and characteristically capitalist, established in the first place by acts of state policy of the world's oldest and most technically developed capitalist country just as it was beginning to go into its heroic period of development and industrialisation. The forging of the Australian colonies of Great Britain ran parallel to the Industrial revolution, and the colonies promoted the growth of imperial Britain. Australian society and the emerging and evolving Australian nation can only be understood as a part of greater Britain, or Britain overseas. The ambiguous relationship of dependence and independence that still shapes so much in Australian life goes back to these origins. Because mainstream Australian society was a transplanted society of a fairly unusual sort, it exhibited certain special characteristics: a small population thinly spread mainly around the coastal fringe of a very large land mass; an economy that developed, apart from the chance existence of large, accessible gold deposits principally as a supplier of raw materials for the metropolitan industries and markets; a truncated, incomplete society, very much a distorted reflection of some aspects of British society; a new society in which everything had to be started from scratch, in which there was a premium on improvisation; and because of the circumstances, a society in which certain bits of the British model took root more strongly than others.

Being part of greater Britain, in the Australian colonies things developed first as an extension of things British. Britain inspired and shaped the social classes, the political models and the social and cultural patterns. But inevitably differences occurred and led to a growing conflict of interests. As national and anti-imperial sentiment grew, the economy, population and evolving social and cultural patterns began to produce more clearly defined classes on a national basis. A fairly distinctive labor movement took shape in the context of the emergence of a national Australian sentiment, a labor movement that was both product and producer of this national ethos. A political culture that valued highly common sense, pragmatism, adaptability and the hip-pocket nerve

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immigration, to the fortunes of Labor governments, the history of the trade union movement, and the political struggles surrounding the changes in the ordering of sexual difference and division.

There is already a body of work attempting this approach in Australian history. For example, Connell and Irving's *Class Structure in Australian History* is a notable attempt to interpret the relevance of class formation and relationships for general developments within Australian history. They are particularly concerned to develop an understanding of class relationships which includes the workplace confrontation between capital and labour but also goes well beyond that, into the political, social and cultural levels. And I could mention others, especially the work undertaken through the journal *Labour History*.

Nevertheless, those attempting this kind of analysis are in a small minority in Australian historical work. And I'm not talking here just about academic histories, but also popular historical works, in print, and on film and television. There has been an upsurge in recent years of interest in Australian history, and the audience continues to grow for these popular historical representations, in books, film, television, and other forms such as historic reconstructed villages, museums, historic homes and the like. This can be interpreted partly as an element in a renewed nationalism, an attempt to define Australian society as unique, as special. But it is also something, I think, much healthier than that, an attempt to come to grips with just what kind of society we live in, where we've come from, and where we're going. But most of these historical works and representations avoid the insights Marx suggested a hundred and thirty years ago. This is not surprising, for Marx's history had evolved. Attachment to the political practice of parliamentary government was the main organising principle of this British colonial milieu.

This labor movement took about half a century from, say, 1890 to 1945 to evolve and for its main characteristics to emerge fully. Of course its evolution has continued to this day. As society has changed the labor movement has reflected the changes. One or two historians, looking for a useful concept to analyse some of the patterns of Australian history, have seized on a phenomenon that was first recognised in the USA of the 1890s — the phenomenon of populism. Growing out of the farming discontent and the labor unrest of the late 1880s and early 1890s, American populism produced the People's Party which ran presidential candidates in the 1892 elections. In 1896 and 1900 the charismatic but unsuccessful Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, ran for US presidency on what was essentially a populist program. Perhaps the differences are more important than the similarities, but the parallels between the emergence of US populism and Australian labor are very striking, including time, economic factors, social development and ideas. Among the obvious differences is the proportional weight of the farm sector and the labor sector. In what was a much less geographically favored country and a much less developed social and economic milieu — very much still part of greater Britain — the developing Australian trade union movement had much more significance than its American counterpart.

The production of interpretations and representations of the past is very much a political background, like any other. All political forces, one way or another, produce and rely on their own versions of history. In this process, those who remain unrepentantly critical of capitalism, and seek the achievement of some kind of socialism, cannot ignore the insights of Marx. We may not find them sufficient for our present purposes, but we most certainly must find them necessary.

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**Ann Curthoys teaches at the NSW Institute of Technology.**

The Australian labour movement took shape in the context of the emergence of a nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment and within a British colonial milieu. Far left: The first display of Eight hour banner, Melbourne, 16 April 1856. Left: Seaman's strike, Melbourne, 1918, demanding a 50% increase in wages.

All this needs to be approached rather cautiously but perhaps labourism can be usefully considered as a form of populism. This may be a fruitful approach helping to focus on certain fixed points and the interrelationship of populist and class propositions, people and class.

The concept of populism has been adopted and applied by a number of political and social theorists to analyse various third world social and political phenomena, especially in Latin America and Africa. In some discussions the three most general populist propositions are social justice, democracy and nationalism. I would, in some cases, certainly in Australia, add liberalism, freedom, justice, etc. Obviously the order of importance and the balance of these