Marx as the Historical Materialist: 
Re-reading The Eighteenth Brumaire* 

Massimiliano Tomba 
University of Padua 
massimiliano.tomba@unipd.it

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to re-read Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire by highlighting the political meaning of a materialist historiography. In the first part, I consider Marx’s historiographical and political intention to represent the history of the aftermath of the revolution of ‘48 as a farce in order to liquidate ‘any faith in the superstitious past’. In the second part I analyse the theatrical register chosen by Marx in order to represent the Second Empire as a society without a body, a phantasmagoria in which the Constitution, the National Assembly and law – in short, everything that the middle class had put up as essential principles of modern democracy – disappear. In the third part I argue that Marx does not elaborate a theory of revolution that is good for every occasion. What interests him is a historiography capable of grasping, in the various temporalities of the revolution, the chance for a true liberation.

Keywords
Karl Marx, historiography, historical materialism, tradition, temporalities, political representation, state

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. 

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Karl Marx is not simply a history of France between 1848 and 1851. With its content and style it contains elements of a revolutionary historiography. This essay attempts to distil these elements and make a case for why this historiography is indeed revolutionary while also attempting to perform the same revolutionary gesture both in content and in style. In the background of this gesture stands Benjamin’s interpretation of the

*Translated by Steven Colatrella, this is a shorter and modified version of Appendix 1 of my book, Marx’s Temporalities (Tomba 2012).
idea of time. In my reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* I want to repeat his historiographical strategy, rather than simply explaining it or formulating another historiography for historical materialism. Marx did not use the formulation 'historical materialism', but instead used the expressions 'practical materialist' and 'communist materialist'. These terms do not express a doctrine but a type of political actor who is able to produce new political images by creating a new historiography of multiple historical temporalities.

The structure of this text is tripartite. In the first part I present the political meaning of the tragedy-farce model whose goal is not an objective representation of historical facts, but a re-reading of both the past and traditions in order to create new practices. The second and central part unveils the political phantasmagoria of the liberal-democratic state. It presents the proletarian perspective faced with the crisis of parliamentary and democratic institutions. The third and last part concerns the delineation of the revolutionary historiographical approach and its relations to different historical temporalities, their combinations and conflicts.

**Freeing history from history**

‘Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce’.1 This is the famous opening to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The passage was suggested to Marx by Engels in a letter dated 3 December 1851, when Marx was preparing to write his text. Engels wrote: ‘It really seems as if old Hegel in his grave were acting as World Spirit and directing history, ordaining most conscientiously that it should all be unrolled twice over, once as a great tragedy and once as a wretched farce, with Caussidiere for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, Barthélemy for St. Just, Flocon for Carnot and that mooncalf with the first dozen debt-encumbered lieutenants picked at random for the Little Corporal and his Round Table of marshals. And so we have already arrived at the Eighteenth Brumaire’.2

The iteration, the repetition of the Hegelian form of repetition,3 produces a

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1. Marx 1975, p. 115; English translation in Marx 1974a, p. 146. See also the new German edition with a commentary by Hauke Brunkhorst: Marx 2007a. On the formula tragedy-farce and comedy, see Marx 2007a, pp. 207–11.
3. Hegel writes that, ‘By repetition, that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.’ (Hegel 1991, p. 333; Hegel 1971, p. 403.)
difference. Repetition is redefined in the shift of the formula *Tragödie-Farce*. This also applies to the ‘Hegel’ mentioned in the *incipit* of what Marx wrote: that quotation obliterates the authority of the reference. Not only is Hegel’s remark taken from some indeterminate place – ‘somewhere’ – which is apparently not important enough to acknowledge, but Hegel even forgets to add the most important thing: the *Tragödie-Farce* model, which Marx takes from Heine. The form of repetition redefines the very form of Hegel’s quote itself: the formula of repetition of the story renders ‘Hegel’ a farce himself, and not because history, due to some mysterious law, is supposed to repeat itself in the form of farce, but because there is no repetition.

There is a tone in Engels’s letter that will also pervade Marx’s writings: it is the farce in which ‘it really seems as if old Hegel in his grave were acting as World Spirit and directing history.’ It is certainly not Hegel, but rather the Hegelian tradition that works from the realm of the dead; it does not work directly on history, but on historiography, and therefore on history itself. In the 1850s the image of historical parallels was spreading, not only between 2 December 1851 and 9 November 1799, the real eighteenth Brumaire, but also between the new Empire and the age of Caesar. ‘Empire’ and ‘Caesarism’ are the keywords of the rhetorical arsenal of the historical parallel against which Marx argues. In the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1869) Marx attacks the neologism Caesarism, inasmuch as the latter is the bearer of superficial historical analogies that, instead of explaining an event, tend to obscure the specific differences between different forms of class struggle.

In the same Preface Marx cites Victor Hugo and Proudhon, who are synecdoches for examples of radically polarised historiographical positions. Victor Hugo, in the act of writing his *Napoléon le petit*, sees nothing but the personal violence of Louis Napoleon, therefore magnifying the figure instead of probing the class struggle involved. This tone will persist in Marx’s writings, and will pervade his historiographical projects.

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4. On the aspect of repetition as a symptom of the incapacity to take hold of the present and, at the same time, as a modality of reappropriation of the present, see Barot 2007, pp. 82–4; Fietkau 1978, pp. 138ff.
8. The term was born in July 1850, the year of publication of the work by Auguste Romieu, *L’Ère des Cèsars*. See also, for bibliographical references regarding this term, Cassina 2001, pp. 18, 41, n. 4.
9. Louis Bonaparte is ‘the man who kills, who transports, who banishes, who expels, who proscribes, who despoils; this man with harassed gesture and glassy eye, who walks with distracted air amid the horrible things he does, like a sort of sinister somnambulist’: Hugo 1909, p. 69; Proudhon 1972. On the historical context, see Baguley 2000.
of minimising it; on the other hand Proudhon, in his ‘Coup d’état’, makes the symmetrically opposite error, that is, the error of objective historiography which represents Napoleon III’s Empire as the mere result of previous historical development.\textsuperscript{10} If Hugo thinks in terms of historical personality, Proudhon only sees the historical development of circumstances that have eventually led Louis Napoleon to power. The same historiographical models are at work in analyses of Hitler and National Socialism, so much so that one could put together fine analyses of the present based upon the historiographical model dominant at this or that point in time. For the historical materialist both positions are false. And there is not even any intermediate position either. The problem is instead a question of showing how History I of the class struggle interacted with History II of French politics from February 1848 onwards, preparing the conditions that allowed ‘a mediocre and grotesque character to become the hero’.\textsuperscript{11} Napoleon III was not an innovator, but the radically new situation made him appear as such.

In writing \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire}, Marx chooses the genre of apology as a genre of refusal and alters the dominant point of view, providing the world with a tragicomic vision free of resignation: Cromwell had dissolved parliament while holding a watch in his hand; Napoleon had read a death sentence to the National Assembly; Louis Napoleon proceeded with theft, lies and public expressions of charlatanism.\textsuperscript{12} Napoleon Bonaparte was followed by the grotesque and mediocre figure of Napoleon III. Repetition is a rhetorical device in which the representation employed is the representation of farce, and where the new element is instead given by the new configuration of class struggle, ever since the red flags on the barricades of Lyon against the tricolour signalled the end of the dream of any national homogeneity.

The historiographical and political intention of Marx is to represent the history of the aftermath of the revolution of ‘48 as a farce, so as to liquidate ‘any faith in the superstitious past’, and get rid of that ‘tradition of all the dead generations’ that ‘weighs like a nightmare $\text{Alp}$ on the brain of the living’.\textsuperscript{13} History can be freed from history only if tradition ceases to oppress the living, only if the ghosts of the past are cleared away. The $\text{Alp}$, the incubus that weighs on the brain of the living, is in the Germanic tradition also a vampire who enters houses disguised as a butterfly to rest on the chest of the sleeper. A ghostly presence indeed. Thus spectres fill the post-revolutionary imaginary, and, specifically, the dictatorship of Napoleon III. The vampire has a political

\begin{enumerate}
\item Marx 1975, p. 559; Marx 1974a, p. 144.
\item Marx 1975, p. 560; Marx 1974a, p. 144.
\item Ibid.
\item Marx 1975, pp. 191–2; Marx 1974a, p. 146.
\end{enumerate}
dimension that is typically modern: it represents the past that does not want to die; that which torments the living or is even resuscitated in mythical form in the reactionary politics of nationalism and fascism. To liberate the living and thereby the true potentialities of the present moment from the rule of the dead, Marx, recalling the gospel passage, writes that we must let ‘the dead bury their dead’. The writing of history puts on the stage ‘a population of the dead’ acting out a burial rite. This has a symbolic function: making a place for the dead allows a society to give itself a past in language, redistributing in this way ‘the space of the possible’. Burying the past defines that which will not be done again, thereby opening a present for that which is yet to be done. Marx’s text eminently demonstrates its performative character. ‘Language allows a practice to be situated in respect to its other, the past.’

After the defeat of the revolutionary proletariat the social imaginary has been occupied by the spectre of revolution. The ‘red spectre [rotes Gespenst]’ evoked by Vaissé is the bugbear of the counter-revolutionaries – it takes the place of the true revolution and manifests itself not with the ‘Phrygian cap of anarchy on the head, but in the uniform of order, in a soldier in red pants’. The spectre is the image that the victors give to communism. This point holds for the opening of the Manifesto as well. The Marxian approach seeks to overturn these images. If all ‘of the powers of Old Europe have entered into a Holy Alliance to exorcise the spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German Police-Spies’, this means that the ‘powers of Old Europe’ are really afraid of the spectre. The oppressors fear the oppressed. The image is therefore overturned: ‘Communism is already acknowledged by all European Powers to be itself a Power.’ Only by escaping the sense of weakness and the air of defeat is it possible to take up the battle anew. This is the sense which prevails in the Manifesto. So it is in The Eighteenth Brumaire. The classes that have defeated the proletariat have for a long time occupied the imaginary of spectres, and the void left by the revolutionary subject has been filled with fear. It is fear that acts as a binding agent for different classes to unite against a sinister and elusive enemy, but it is fear that also occupies

15. Marx 1975, p. 117; Marx 1974a, p. 149.
19. Marx 1975, p. 117; Marx 1974a, p. 149.
23. Ibid.
the imaginary of the proletariat, by crushing it under its very defeat and tying it to the world of the dead. The problem, then, is to write this history so as to free history from a peculiar tradition and an imaginary: what Marx seeks to evoke is the spirit [Geist] of the revolution, not its spectre [Gespenst].

The tragic-comic model is functional to the new revolutionary historiography: it is not a descriptive model, but a performative one. This Marxist historiography matures along with its commitment to political struggle. We find it for the first time and in an embryonic form in the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, written between December 1843 and January 1844, and published in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher in February 1844. Here, the German system is called an ‘anachronism’, a modern ancien régime which is nothing but the comic figure [Komödiant] of a world order whose real heroes are dead: ‘The last stage of a world-historical form is its comedy’. The representation of the German system as an ancien régime of clowns is offered in order to take leave happily from a past. Marx’s style of this political history only makes sense if it is thought of as addressed not to an abstract, neutral and disinterested reader, but to the concrete reader with specific political and economic interests. Marx learns at the school of workers’ struggles a new way to read the various historical temporalities we find in revolutions.

Breaking with bourgeois historiography is not simply a matter of telling another story, but breaking with the form of its representation. If the epoch of the press has allowed us to believe for a moment that a literary production aimed at a disinterested audience was possible, Marx marks its partiality, repoliticises this sphere and turns to a well-determined interlocutor: the working class in struggle. The point of view from which Marx writes history is indeed particularist. Nothing is more ideological than claiming to write independently from every particular point of view and for a universal audience, which only exists in the cunning rhetoric of the self-styled ‘disinterested’ or

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28. On the changes in form, style and interpretive models between the writings on The Class Struggles in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire, see Moss 1985, pp. 555ff.
29. Osborne 1998, p. 198: ‘If Dadaism was an attempt to match the effects of film within the (technically obsolete) medium of painting, so the Manifesto may be understood as an attempt to invent a literary form of political communication appropriate to a period of mass politics on an international scale’.
'objective' historian. Every historicism is also a rhetoric. For the materialist, the past is never reducible to mere speech: it is not a question of representing the past ‘in a convincing narrative’. There is an opposition between the essence of fascist historiography that rewrites the past in its own image, and the materialist historiography that rewrites the past in order to release the revolutionary possibilities of the present. Past revolutionary chances that have so far been erased by the victorious classes are revitalised in the struggles of the present. The materialist historian is not looking for an objective description. He knows not only that traditions are always constructions, but also that facts themselves are interpretations. The materialist historian highlights the subjective side of the object, the constitutional force of a class practice within a historical phenomenon. His or her history is partisan and takes the side of one of the subjects of the struggle. It does not just sympathise with the latter, but reads history itself from its point of view. It takes part in that conflict by politicising historiography. It is not meant to be an objective history or the representation of history as such, but instead narrates how things went for the side that attempted to redeem itself; it wants to build a piece of tradition which, from the past attempts at liberation, is able to join in a fight in the present.

The tragedy-farce model has no heuristic ends but only a practical one: it corresponds to an analysis of reality that can open new possibilities for change: the only analysis that the historical materialist can consider scientific. According to the last thesis on Feuerbach, the ‘practical materialist’ does not oppose philosophy and praxis, but interprets the world in a way in which it becomes possible to change it. Science is not connected to a more objective image of the object before the subject but to the truth that discovers a new way to relate to reality. Representing the past as a farce serves to destroy one of its registers so that the revolutionary act of creating the not-yet-existing will not duplicate the ancient tradition by borrowing from traditional watchwords and costumes. Nonetheless, reviving a tradition does not necessarily mean reproducing the old: tradition is not always, or solely, a weight and a block, it can also serve to glorify the new struggles, to push them forward, to exalt

30. Although not in the sense conferred by Hayden White (White 1973).
33. Marx 1975, p. 115; Marx 1974a, p. 146.
new tasks: tradition can also be a revolutionary trigger. But not every tradition. The parody of the past can be a brake on action, but it can also be an impulse capable of liquidating the shackles which block another tradition. The parody of the Empire by Napoleon III did not block his action but functioned as a powerful chemical reagent.

When the heroes, parties and masses of the French Revolution established – ‘in Roman costume and with Roman slogans’ – modern civil society, the revival of tradition was not a brake on the Revolution but rather a stimulus for new struggles: the gladiators of the Revolution ‘found in the stern classical traditions of the Roman republic the ideals, art forms, and self-deceptions they needed in order to hide from themselves the limited bourgeois content of their struggles and to maintain their enthusiasm at the high level appropriate to great historical tragedy’.34 Not unlike Cromwell and the English revolutionaries, who had borrowed words, passions and illusions from the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution. In both cases, the resurrection of the dead was not a block, it did not serve as a parody of the old fights, but exalted the new one, by putting back into movement the true spirit of the revolution. This contrasts with the historical situation in which Marx writes because now the tasks of the revolutionary proletariat are different. The politicised historiography of Marx is a historiography of the revolutionary crisis: Marx writes history so that proletarians may cease to evoke the ghosts of the past and enlist them in their service,35 in contrast to the revolutionaries of 1848 who parodied the revolutionary tradition of 1793–536 but remained trapped.

The proletarian revolution needs a different symbolic horizon than that of the bourgeois revolutions. Historical materialists cannot create one, but they can work for the destruction of a tradition which is a barrier to it, in order to reconnect today’s struggle with its true tradition, the one that the historiography of the victorious classes will do anything to repress. Whoever participates in this, writing hymns to the obliteration of memory while thinking that such a loss of memory can itself have revolutionary potential, becomes a participant in the construction of the dominant imaginary that, through the erasure of that tradition, pushes the working class offstage. The current removal of memory, like its institutional museumification, is likewise part of the postmodern saga of its mystification, which is not only a falsification of history, but also the production of an imaginary in which various narrations are of equivalent value and therefore indifferent. An archive of working-class memory must not

35. Marx 1975, p. 115; Marx 1974a, p. 147.
36. Ibid.
consign that history to a museum but rather evoke it, because that tradition still calls for revenge. Tradition, the notion that traditionalists used as a political weapon in the crisis of tradition and society of the ancien régime, should rather be used37 to reconnect the struggles of the past to those of the present, to load the past with a revolutionary charge whose fuse is to be triggered in the instant of the struggle today. It is the struggles of past generations that must be remembered because they are still asking to be freed from the tyranny of the past – and of the present. If the concept of tradition, i.e., as continuity, is a weapon to oppose the Revolution for traditionalists38 the workers’ tradition triggers a break with that of the ruling classes for Marx.

The great innovation of the Marxian Eighteenth Brumaire is the duplication of historiographical registers: Marx substitutes a synchronic relationship between the past and the tradition in the articulation of the present praxis for the diachronic flow past-present. The focus on this past, which is present in the present as tradition, is an element that distinguishes this interpretation from that of 1845;39 Marx now explores the different temporalities of the present praxis since the past-present, namely tradition, is a weapon to be salvaged from the grip of the traditionalists. If to them tradition is a mode of historical continuity and the search for social cohesion, to Marx it becomes the energy of discontinuity and rupture. Traditionalists build the past in order to impose it and legitimise it in terms of continuity; the historical materialist works with tradition in order to show the fault-lines running throughout history and thus to pose the problem of the true revolutionary discontinuities which can break the story of exploitation. Marx is here concerned with the interplay of tradition with the praxis of the present, including its ambivalences.

Historical tradition produced the French peasants’ belief in the miracle that… a man named Napoleon would restore all their glory. And an individual turned up who pretended to be that man, because he bore the name of Napoleon.… After twenty years of vagabondage and a series of grotesque adventures the prophecy was fulfilled and the man became Emperor of the French.40

37. In contrast, Assoun, denouncing the conservative and anti-Enlightenment character of the idea of tradition, argues that its use on the part of Marx constitutes a movement beyond materialism: Assoun 1978, pp. 119–21.
38. On the concept of tradition as ‘Merkmale der Kontinuität’ in the counter-revolutionaries Bonald and Adam Müller, see Wiedenhofer 1990, pp. 638–9.
39. Likewise, though coming to an opposed conclusion, is Assoun 1978, pp. 130–1.
40. Marx 1975, p. 199; Marx 1974a, p. 239.
Tradition interacts with the present circumstances. If any man can become Emperor of the French, it is because his praxis intersects with a tradition present in the most numerous class of the French population: the peasants. This tradition ensures continuity even at the cost of discontinuity. Tradition can in fact contribute to the production of discontinuity: ‘the parody of imperialism’ served to liberate the French nation from the burden of one ‘tradition’ and to bring out ‘the antagonism between state power and society in its pure form’.41 The new ‘state centralisation’, fuelled by reference to the imperial tradition, could succeed only through an apparent discontinuity with the most recent republican tradition.

The parody of the present is the means that Marx uses to rescue it from those spectral presences that belong to the nightmare which sucks away its energy like a vampire. The parody of every single character is built around the formula tragedy-farce: Marrast is the ‘Republican in yellow gloves’ disguised ‘with the mask of the old Bailly’; Louis Napoleon is ‘the adventurer who is now hiding his commonplace and repulsive countenance beneath the iron death mask of Napoleon’.42 The parallelism is used in a double register which deconstructs the meaning of the present, turning it into farce. If the uncle ‘recalled the campaigns of Alexander in Asia, the nephew recalled the conquests of Bacchus in the same land’.43 The different registers of memory – Alexander and Bacchus – redeploy figures of the two Napoleons: if Alexander was only a demigod, ‘Bacchus was a god, in fact, he was the god of the Society of 10 December’,44 the protector of the private army of Bonaparte, consisting of 10,000 beggars, ‘roués of doubtful origin and uncertain means of subsistence’, ‘corrupt adventurers’, ‘vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged criminals, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, confidence tricksters, lazzaroni, pickpockets, sleight of hand experts, gamblers, macquereaux, brothel-keepers, porters, pen-pushers, organ-grinders, rag and bone vendors, knife-grinders, tinkers and beggars: in short, the whole indeterminate fragmented mass, tossed backwards and forwards, which the French call la bohème’,45 and that the bohemian Emperor puffs with ‘cigars and champagne, jelly chickens and garlic sausages’, the ‘higher powers which man, and the soldier in particular, cannot withstand’.46 The curtain falls on the

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41. Marx 1975, p. 203; Marx 1974a, p. 244.
42. Marx 1975, p. 116; Marx 1974a, p. 148.
43. Marx 1975, p. 163; Marx 1974a, p. 199.
44. Ibid.
45. Marx 1975, p. 161; Marx 1974a, p. 197.
46. Marx 1975, p. 163; Marx 1974a, p. 199.