

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

K.Marx

April 9-10, 2008

In February 1848 the French King Louis Philippe was evicted out of his palace and fled with his family to England. A mob congregated outside the Tuileries and broke into the Royal quarters, which still showed sign of the hasty retreat of its former residents¹, and parts of it remained there for weeks, making a wild party of all the victuals stored in the palace. The mood was exuberant, the Republic was once again proclaimed, and in fact a true social revolution had occurred fulfilling the interrupted intentions of the original French Revolution sixty years earlier. But with such auspicious beginning how could the whole thing end in such a debacle and anti-climax as the Emperorship of Napoleon III? Every thing happens twice in history, Hegel has noted, and Marx added subsequently that the second time as a farce. And indeed the character of Louis Bonaparte and the route to his success were if anything ludicrous. But how could it happen? Marx rejects both the theories of Hugo and Proudhon as presented in their respective books just after the event. Hugo saw the *coup d'etat* as the work of a single individual, thereby unwittingly making out of his 'Napoleon le Petit' a major player, while Proudhon similarly undercut his intentions by reducing the events to those of impersonal social forces, thereby absolving the emperor of any responsibility. Marx is trying to strike a middle road, stripping Bonaparte of all heroism without reducing his culpability.

The original French Revolution followed an ascending curve, each movement being supported by an even more radical movement and eventually overthrown by it; while the Revolution of 1848 followed a descending orbit, where each movement sought the support of a more conservative one and ending up being evicted by them. The initial exuberance was rather quickly suppressed and the uprising who rose in an attempt to revert to the loss of momentum was brutally quenched in June 1848 by the general Cavaignac. Thereafter the Republicans (the pure bourgeois in the terminology of Marx) took almost dictatorial control, a Constituent Assembly was formed in order to draft a Constitution . On December 10 Louis Bonaparte was elected President and the power of the petite bourgeois were broken but not completely vanquished. They form an alliance with the Party of Order, consisting of the landowning classes and the new industrialists, both of which are for a restitution of the monarchy, although with different dynasties in mind. The Orleans and the Bourbons, something that will severely test their future cohesion. In the early summer of 1849 the Royalists take power and use their majority in the National Assembly to restrict universal suffrage (and thereby hoping to cement their majority also in the future). This is a move that the President shrewdly opposes. His first ministry is of the Party of Order, but subsequent ministries will not. Starting May 1850 there is a struggle between the parliamentary majority and the President in which the former lose in succession the control of the army, its very majority forming coalitions with the socialists.

¹ An eyewitness report of a Swedish visitor can be gleaned from 'Historisk läsebok för folkskolan'

Attempts at revision of the constitution blocked by the minority (such meta-decisions have to be taken by a strong majority, which cannot be mustered). During 1851 it comes to an open confrontation between the executive power and the parliamentary, the latter becoming more and more irrelevant, deserted by its constituency, the army, the press, and the final *coup d'état* on December 2 1851, is more of a *coup de grace*.

Who was Louis Bonaparte? Ostensibly a nephew of the great Napoleon, but essentially just an adventurer, who had lost his French citizenship, at one point serving as a police in England and becoming a naturalized citizen of Switzerland. He had run into great debts and part of his motivation of becoming a President was to embezzle the French state in order to settle his own affairs. His natural allies he found among the *Lumpen-proletariat* a motley crowd of good-for-nothings, thieves, prostitutes, hustlers, vagabonds, the contempt of Marx is visceral for the rubble, as well as the common soldiers, whose loyalty he bought by beer, cigars and sausages, No wonder that a man that belonged in the gutter, mobilized its denizens. Politically, Marx admits, his strongest support was from the French peasantry, a sorry if numerically extensive conglomerate of small land-holders, eking out a desperate subsistence economy, pathetically self-supportive and thus making up a society with as little cohesion as that of potatoes in a sack. Apart from society, they could not represent themselves, hence needed someone to represent them.

The bourgeois classes did not realize their true political interest, and as far as they did, they abandoned them for their own petty private affairs. The country was basking in an economic boom, except for a crises in 1851 playing into the hands of Louis Bonaparte, and what the country needed most, they thought, was tranquility. And this was also the message that Bonaparte apprehended and sent to the Assembly. It is an old-fashioned trick and excuse, used as much today as in the past, that of discounting politics to that of a squabble which should not be allowed to interfere with the real business. Political freedoms and issues are luxuries to be savored intermittently but one should of course always have a proper perspective. And the Assembly played into his hands, becoming as noted above, alienated from the bourgeois whose interests they were supposed to identify and promote, they degenerated into total irrelevancy.

The final take-over was not really a surprise. If any future event has ever cast a shadow into the present, that was the upcoming 'coup' to which Bonaparte repeatedly alluded to, only to back-pedal. And so it came, allowing the braggart to play the role of the hero. France really got what they deserved.

This book has been hailed by many as a masterwork of historical analysis² and hence my curiosity has been whetted and intrigued³. What is so great about it? For one thing Marx writes as a contemporary journalist, he has not dug into any sources, save those available through the media of the day, he has not interviewed Louis Bonaparte nor any of the other actors, he has not read any correspondence, has not been privy to any internal

² Edmund Wilson in his 'To the Finland Station' writes glowingly about it.

³ The actual physical book I have laid my hands on is an English translation under the imprint of 'Lawrence and Wishart' executed on rather inferior paper, and being linked to the Progress Publishers in Moscow. Some Cyrillic information is also provided. All of it making the reading of the book felt as mildly subversive

messages. In short the empirical underpinnings are rather shallow. This is not necessarily a drawback, empiricism without a proper analysis is pointless. The interesting thing is the perspective and the theory behind the analysis. To Marx individuals count for nothing, or at least very little. What is important is the class to which they belong and to identify the intrinsic interests of such a class, interest the object of which is to preserve the class and increase its privileges. The small-holding peasants make up no class, according to Marx, they form as noted no cohesive body, are self-sufficient and thus only exist as individuals with no transcending interest. Of course they make up a voting body, and some of them may be politically aware, but then not primarily as peasants but as citizens. Their voting body being empty of political content, yet providing a frame for such, it is tempting to fill it in. This is what Bonaparte to some extent does. Similarly Marx does not honor the rubble making up the *Lumpen-proletariat* with any kind of class identity, and characteristically its congeniality to Bonaparte is pointed out, he being but a particularly audacious example of its motley crowd. Thus Marx rejects any suggestion that Bonaparte through intelligence and cunning may have masterminded the entire situation, something which may have been tacitly assumed, had a thorough empirical investigation of the material associated with him been made. Bonaparte may only be credited with a readiness to play dirty, something that his more civilized adversaries may have been unable to do. As to his motives those, according to Marx, would not rise above the petty concern of any criminal. Still there is a danger that Marx underestimates the personal importance of Bonaparte, blinded by his personal contempt for him. He may be a political non-entity, but that does not prevent him from being shrewd and to adopt some winning formula. The parallels with the modern case of Putin are striking. Also somebody discounted as a non-entity, but as most non-entities enhanced by the assumption of power revealing a certain shrewdness in sizing up people and being able to manipulate them even when possessing no obvious charisma. And both of them riding high on the wave of what is most desirable is political stability and economic development, taken for granted in established democracies, but assuming a seductive urgency in chaotic societies.

Pettiness was also the scourge of the bourgeois classes, especially those of the petite variety. An inability to clearly formulate their real interests and to act accordingly. Instead their proper concerns were swallowed up by narrow consideration of private gain in a flourishing economy⁴.

It is always an interesting problem to investigate power, how it is created and above all how it is maintained. A piece of paper, i.e. a written constitution, can have a lot of influence, yet of course a written text is but a formal string of characters, and it is fascinating how it can be a catalyst for real power through its interpreters. Some aspects of this are touched upon by Marx, in particular the crucial problem on how a piece of paper can encode the way it can be changed. As noted, the revision of the constitution foundered on the strict rules for a change, allowing a minority to block it⁵.

Ultimately the arbitrator of power is force, often only manifested by its threat. The

⁴ At least most of the time, with some telling exceptions, which only made their obsession more acute

⁵ The constitution also forbade the re-election of a President (once again a striking parallel to the recent case of Putin). A measure intended to check the ambitions of a such, but in this case only further stimulating by the threat of frustration.

control over the army was crucial, and Marx somehow trivializes this (but maybe accurately so) by referring to the ease of buying its favors, an undertaking particularly suited to the temperament of Bonaparte.

April 10, 2008 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*