

To the Finland Station

A study in the Writing and Acting of History

E. Wilson

April 30 - May 6, 2006

Marx as a philosopher ultimately suffers from having been taken too seriously. Huge numbers of intellectuals have been forced his theories in States officially committed to the principles of his philosophy, and such exposure has inevitably brought tedium and ultimately disgust and ridicule. Much of this is no doubt well-deserved, yet there are features of his thoughts, which had they been saved vulgarization and preaching, would appeal to many of those who either disdain him from over-exposure, or from what has been perpetrated in his name.

Edmund Wilson is foremost a literary critic, and his approach to Marx and Marxism is indeed that of a literary critic, whose aim it is both to present the biography of his protagonist as well as putting him into a historical context, all in order to whet the appetite of the reader to delve himself into the works that the critic can but allude to. Wilson is hardly a Marxist, but he is definitely a man on the Left, who writes about Marx with sympathy laced with admiration, yet who has the ambition of detachment. This has the curious effect that while the virtues of Marx are merely alluded to, his shortcomings are pin-pointed in concrete details, which almost makes you suspect that the praise of the author is done tongue in cheek, only to make his sarcasm come out more effectfully. Yet in the final analysis I believe that Wilson is sincere, he was at one time at least genuinely taken by Marx, like so many others of his generation, (and generations to come); and that initial delight still survives, and in fact is being purified through a critical and unsentimental perspective.

The books split into three parts. The first is meant to present the predecessors to Marx, mainly French intellectuals; the second concentrates on Marx and his collaboration with Engels, and the third the implementation of Marxism, or at least what stood for Marxism, in the real world by Lenin and Trotsky. The book was published in 1940, and probably conceived and written in the late thirties, when some of the excesses of the Stalinist regime had become known to the intellectual West, producing both disillusionment as well as stauncher commitments. As the book is written the achievements of Communism in Russia are still conceived as heroic, and Trotsky is still alive, if in exile.

There are two centuries that more than any others were the centuries of the intellectuals, namely the 18th and 19th century. The Enlightenment brought about the ascendancy of Reason and the optimism it engendered propounded by a still thin veneer of 'philosophes'. Politically it culminated in the French Revolution, which proved that intellectuals mattered, and whose ramifications dominated the succeeding century, which spawned a wider class of intellectuals emerging as a social type by itself. In many ways Marx is the epitome of the 19th century intellectual. Visionary and Encyclopedic at the same time, absolutely committed to his work, pursued at great personal privations.

The Scientific Revolution of the 17th century had had spectacular intellectual impact, while its practical impact did not appear until the 19th century (and completely changed the 20th). In particular it was assumed that the same paradigm that had been so successful in the sphere of Natural Science, also should provide the key to the Social Sciences. Just as the physical universe was governed by the law of gravitation, a similar force was supposed to hold for societies and the interaction of men, the task it was of the intellectual to formulate and derive the necessary consequences of. The proper study became that of history, out of which the inevitable lessons should be learned.

Wilson chooses to introduce his book with the French historian Michelet discovering the Italian thinker Vico, who claimed that Social Institutions were the work exclusively of man and not divinely ordained, and hence subject to human modification and reform as well. This, according to Wilson, became a revelation to Michelet and the inspiration of his subsequent work as a historian; and thus, one presumes, a fitting epitaph for the subject that is the books - the writing and the acting of History spelled with capital letters.

Michelet is supposed to be the historian that made it his mission to immerse himself completely in the past, so as to prevent the insidious power of hindsight to pervert the interpretation of it, but instead present its events as they must have appeared to those then living, a tour de force of imagination. Wilson also asserts that Michelet was the inspiration of Proust and that his narrative was a work of art never before equaled in historical writing, and one surmises with no serious rival to succeed him either. Certainly the author makes the readers mouth water, and he especially recommends the multi-volume treatise on the French Revolution, of which Michelet was not an eye-witness, but lived close enough in time to imbibe it fully.

The French Revolution brought about the professional radical and revolutionary, many of which came to sorry ends, as it is well-known revolutions tend to devour their children. Wilson picks up a few names, some rather obscure like that of Babeufs, others more well-known as Fourier, Saint-Simone and the British industrialist Owen, in order to delineate the Socialist roots and its original Utopian nature, as illustrated by a few Socialist sects trying it out in the experimental lands of the United States¹. It is in this tradition that Marx has to be seen and appreciated.

There is a contrast, at times almost comic, between the particulars of a mans life and the objective creed he is trying to perpetrate, supposedly independant of time and originator. Wilson spends a lot of effort to paint the personalities of Marx and Engels, as well as to supply biographical data. We learn of Marxs single-mindedness, his tendency to get embroiled in particulars quite out of proportion to the importance of the issues involved. He is a man easily pricked, ready to take offence, more than eager to lash out². But it was all necessary, Wilson explains, to avoid getting side-tracked and lured into

¹ In this connection Owen stands out as somewhat of an anomaly. While many Socialists at the time was foremost intellectuals and dreamers, Owen was an able man in matters practical. Well-known is his model textile plant in Scotland, ruled dictatorially by him, and thus not liable to be reproduced by lesser man. Set to eradicate poverty in the world he met with frustration and cynical disillusionment as he became aware that this supposedly universal interest was not universally shared. Yet he was indefatigable in his efforts, even setting up new model societies in the States.

² The case of the French Socialist Prudhon is a case in point. He had initially attracted Marx by his

the compromises any congenial man is forced to make in order to accommodate himself. Significantly Marx also proved true and faithful to Engels and to his wife, the closest of his friends. Marx was an intellectual, delighted to pursue an argument for its own sake; thus he had little truck with agitators, heroic as they may appear, to him the foremost duty was to lay an unassailable intellectual foundation, otherwise what moral right did one have to trick people into following you? Thus his relations with charismatic figures like Lasalle and Bukharin were uneasy. Most of his active life he spent in exile in London³ living in abject poverty. In fact a few times he was turned out of his scant belongings due to outstanding debts, and some of his children expired out of material want, the most bitter experience thereof being his son, the brightest of his children⁴. His relation to Engels thus became somewhat lopsided. Engels was wealthy, the son of a German manufacturer with plants in Manchester, and by necessity as well as attractive choice, impelled to pursue ironically the career of a capitalist. He not only had to give the Marx family hand-outs, he was also compelled to write articles for Marx, so the latter could follow his own work undisturbed by the journalistic obligations he had assumed in order to find some kind of steady income. Wilson notes that Marx was singularly impractical in providing for himself (early on an academic appointment in Bonn had fallen through depriving him of a natural avenue of material support and the world of a professor).

Engels was very different. Wilson almost speaks of a Jekyll and Hyde split. Left to himself he was an easygoing fellow, not above the pleasures of sensual delights (an expert draughtsman) and social dalliance; a keen observer of the minutiae of everyday life⁵. Together with Marx he took on a far more acerbic personality the better to blend with his friend. The relationship between the two was indeed lopsided not only financially, with Marx intellectually being the dominating. Yet the relationship was not one of a Boswell to a Johnson, he was no abject admirer, but proved indispensable to his master in providing him with common sense out of his manufacturing experience. What indeed would Marx have known of the nitty-gritty of the industrial world but for the information and instruction supplied by Engels?

Indeed what did Marx really know? He knew a lot of course, having all his mature

claim that Property is theft, and been invited to contribute to an organized correspondence. Prudhon had his misgivings. He referred to Luther - the great compatriot of Marx, who no sooner having overthrown the Catholic clergy set himself to the task of establishing an equally suppressive Protestant variety. He exhorts Marx that they should not set themselves up as leaders of a new intolerance, or pose as apostles of a new religion, even if that religion be that of reason itself. With the hindsight of the 20th century prophetic warnings. They did, however, not endear him to Marx, who dropped him. In fact Marx was not above ridiculing Prudhon for his lack of education, not being a doctor as himself.

³ Occasional visits to Germany belies the assumption that his exile was entirely political.

⁴ Families of the 19th century often suffered domestic tragedies. In our age the death of a child is conceived as the worst calamity that can befall you, and there is no reason to believe that our ancestors should have felt differently. Yet they prevailed, because what choice did they have? Such shadows must have lent to their lives a certain sombre dignity, which modern man, untouched by personal tragedy cannot really fathom, yet vaguely senses the loss of, thus his need for so called experience and artificial trauma.

⁵ Wilson records a walking trip he made in France and the delight he took in its rambling course

life being a studious fellow⁶, but wherein was his real expertise? Where was he coming from? The obvious answer to that was first of all that he was a Jew, a newly liberated Jew, and as such secular and rebellious against the faith in which he had been born against his will. But tradition, especially of a religious kind runs deep, and you may reject it only to find yourself even more tightly bound to it. Wilson makes indeed a lot of his Jewishness, trying in it to find the key to his whole outlook of that of a societies outcast⁷. And in fact his father had high hopes for him and was very worried that he would squander his gifts⁸, and indeed the untimely death of his father struck Marx deeply, and throughout his life he was worried about his liver, which had been the nemesis of his father⁹, while the much postponed death of his mother was merely a source of financial frustration. Secondly Marx was German, and not any German, but the particular denizen of that realm the Germans claimed, according to Heine as a compensation for the dominance of the seas by the British and the land by the Russians. Namely the realm of the clouds, meaning metaphysical inquiry. Marx as a student in Berlin was very influenced, as indeed most students by Hegel¹⁰ and indeed the philosophical outlook he imbibed with Hegel was to prove crucial to his philosophy christened Dialectic materialism by himself. German metaphysics has not fared well with Anglo-Saxon thought starting with Hume and Kant¹¹ and held in contempt by pragmatic American thinkers later in the century¹². Thus it is not surprising that the most devastating criticism Wilson levies against the intellectual work of Marx is directed exactly at his philosophy. Marxism consists of a blend of (metaphysical) philosophy, political action and economic theory, and historical interpretation. Like all

⁶ The seriousness of a 19th century intellectual like Marx contrasts spectacularly with those of his 20th century epigones as will be noted further on.

⁷ In fact he writes dangerously close to resorting to clichés. *As a Jew, Marx stood somewhat outside Society; as a man of genius above it.* More interestingly he notes later on that the characteristic genius of the Jew has been a moral one, going on to claim that the essential insights of Freud were moral, singling out the irrational and destructive as distortions of what is natural and creative; while the tendency of a Jung in the psychoanalytic movement is to lead his troubled patients into a dreamland of ancient myths. He goes on to assert that nobody but a Jew could have wielded the moral weapons to crack the fortress of bourgeois self-satisfaction, and fighting so uncompromisingly and obstinately for the victory of the oppressed classes. However, when Wilson goes on to Einsteins questioning of the well-operating system of Newton, he is way out of his proper bounds.

⁸ How touching and familiar it strikes the author of this text, and this more than anything else in Wilsons tale makes him warm up to the man

⁹ who had died from cancer of it, a fate that the son, so typically, feared for himself. It may be worthy to note that the picture Marx had of himself was that of a Prometheus being punished by the gods for bringing fire to the people, having his liver hacked at by eagles.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer always made a point of scheduling his lectures at the same time as that of Hegel, invariably suffering a scant audience while the lecture room of Hegel was thronged with eager students

¹¹ Yes indeed why should one not count Kant as an Anglo-Saxon philosopher in spite of his German provenance and thoroughness?

¹² William James makes a remark to the effect that a grammatical well-written text tends to give the illusion of content even if there is none to be had; and that this explains the earnestness with which Hegel has been studied.

blends it is not so easy to isolate the different strands as they tend to reinforce each other, but if one strand cries out to be isolated and removed, it certainly is the philosophical part, which probably is the source of most of the silliness to which Marxism has degenerated. Wilson notes that according to Hegel History is a moving spirit and that it proceeds by thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, the clarification of which gives cohesion to a historical narrative. It certainly is an intellectually attractive idea, as intellectual inquiry and delight essentially pertains to the finding of simple principles whose complex ramifications provide an explanation of a confusing sensual world. Thus we should not wonder at its seductive power, but not all attractive ideas turn out to be viable ones. Marx essentially incorporated it unchanged in his philosophy and it has since then provided a rigid paradigm to impose on the world¹³ To excise the dialectic principle out of Marxism would no doubt be a painful process to the organism, yet I believe none that would compromise its viability. I believe that just as many moderns find it incumbent upon themselves to impose on their disciplines a spurious respectability through quantitative underpinnings, Marx no doubt found it imperative to give a metaphysical anchoring of his system of thought¹⁴. The other aspect of his philosophy - materialism, is a more interesting one. Basically Marx turned Hegel on the head. Hegel was a classical idealist, to which the material world was just a manifestation of a spiritual¹⁵; while Marx instead wanted to see idealism as a manifestation of the material. Modern natural science may be seen as the epitome of this idea, and thus I would be very surprised at Marx having made an essential contribution to it except as a mere promoter; yet the status of ultimate Natural science tends to undercut this view, ironically making it instead the prime justification for many a Social science, raising them above sentimentality. In particular Marx became a vocal opponent of religion, his characterization of it as being the opium of the people being one of the few sayings of Marx known to people in general. Yet as noted above, rejection often is just another form of embracement, and the similarities between Christianity and Marxism have been pointed out so often that they have become hackneyed.

The very basis for Marxism is not metaphysical respectability but indignation. It is this indignation that provided the fire that lit Marx throughout his life and provided the emotional appeal that made his mission understandable to a much larger circle of people, who otherwise would have been quite unmoved by his intellectual argument. An indignation that made of his philosophy a political project, as illustrated by his famous injunction to philosophers no longer just to interpret the world but to change it.

Wherein the source of this righteous indignation? Had the industrial revolution brought upon the world misery never before seen? It is indeed very tempting to make such an interpretation. Industrial labour making visible the suffering of exploitation so

¹³ Engels has some very silly mathematical illustrations of the principle, silly enough to inspire the scorn even of a mathematical illiterate the likes of which I presume Wilson represents. Namely by negating a you get $-a$ and by negating again a^2 i.e. something bigger than the original! The astute British Biologist Haldane was in the 30's led by accommodation to party spirit to impose the scheme on biology, reporting that it had been a very worthwhile and instructive exercise, an admission that Wilson rightfully denounces as an abject exercise in obedience.

¹⁴ Respectable at the time, but to later observer, a concession to mysticism

¹⁵ An idea most mathematicians find attractive

notably described my many contemporaries¹⁶. Engels certainly saw it first hand reporting from the bleak developments of the modern industrial town of Manchester, and Owen, as we have footnoted above, was aghast at it, committed in his way to its eradication. Was it really new? Human suffering is certainly not an invention of the industrial revolution, it has existed since time immemorial, and the lot of the peasant population throughout the ages has certainly not been a pic-nic, ravaged with waves of starvations, still prevalent throughout the agricultural masses of the Third World today, causing the great emigration from the country to the city, so surprising and contradictory to the innocent western tourist, who only is aware of the misery he can see, unable to imagine that which he cannot. But the industrial revolution gave to misery a face, just as it imposed human will on the landscape in a new and appalling sense¹⁷ And I suspect that Marx and his contemporaries sincerely believed that the world had gotten far worse. The French Revolution was a revolt against the unearned privileges of feudality that stultified society and which Enlightenment had taught had no rational basis whatsoever. Yet, Marx seems to argue, the abolition of the feudal world-order was a move from the pot into the fire. Whereas in the feudal world everyone had a place and there were mutual commitments, the landlord may 'own' his serfs, yet as an owner he had an obligation towards them, supporting them in times of want (at least in principle); the Capitalism that supplanted it, stripped the common man from all protection, and degraded all human relationships to a commercial common factor. Although feudalism was nothing to return to, it is hard not to sense in the indignation of Marx a certain nostalgia for an imagined Eden of the past¹⁸, and Wilson is at pains to point out that there is in Marx a definite influence of Rousseau. In fact both Marx and Engels at times indulged in wishful antropological phantasies to the effect that original populations had been Communist in practice (before being perverted by advancing civilization?)

Marx differed from earlier idealists socialists in his conviction that liberation could not come from above, as proposed by Owen¹⁹ but that society was divided into classes, the interests of which clashed, and could not be resolved by compromise, but settled one way or another by open strife (in practice, following the will of history, only in one way). It is in this unsentimental approach to social evils, that Marxisms distinguishes itself from its predecessors and manifests its essential features, explaining why experiments of Socialism based on altruistic idealism are bound to come to grief. It is often remarked sarcastically

¹⁶ To most people the harrowing tales brought about by that expert tearjerker Dickens remain the immediate examples

¹⁷ One is reminded of the ravagings of a Blake against the uglification of nature that was making itself already manifest in the British Isles at the end of the 18th century.

¹⁸ Communist parties, as far as the designation is still being used in post-cold-war western countries, ironically tend to be proponents of oldfashioned virtues, making them attractive to people resentful of modern day consumerism

¹⁹ Owen was not an aristocrat by birth. He had risen from humble origins to a position of power and influence through hard work and superior ability. The notion of merit provides an unsettling element to the rigidity of Marxian class-systems, by suggesting that class-identity is not like that of race, but in some, albeit in exceptional cases, subject to individual discretion. This view of things certainly has influenced American thinking, making a hero and exemplar of the self-made man.

that if the proletariat is bound to prevail by history, why work for its triumph, when it is inevitable anyway. This certainly was not the way Marx and his contemporaries thought. Whether or not on the side of impersonal historic forces, it was still up to individual man to take the stand and work for its manifestation, without that collective will, it would not come to pass. Thus the confrontation between opposing interests was far more bitter and violent than its pale shadows of the present day would make believe²⁰. And Marx, Wilson contends, had a not insignificant sadistic streak in him. Could it be, the author speculates, that what ultimately moved Marx was not so much love for the proletariat (personally Marx was not known as a particular warm and loving person, his cold indifference to a recent persona loss of Engels, almost brought an irreparable rupture to their friendship, Wilson reports) as hatred against Capitalism and capitalists²¹ for which the proletarians only figured as victims. It is a well-known psychological fact (to resort to rhetorical figures of speech) that indignation loves to be fuelled.

Having disposed of the philosophical element of Marxism and briefly touched on its political, it may be time to direct your gaze at its economical theory. Wilson does so and rejects two of Marx tenets, namely his theory of intrinsic labour value, and his prophecy of internal contradictions of capitalism. Supposedly there may be more, maybe even much more to Marxism economical theory than that, but if so unknown to Wilson or at least not worth his attention. The ultimate effect is that Marxist economy is disposed of just like the metaphysical leg if not as rapidly and totally. If so one may ask oneself what is left of Marxism after yet a serious amputation? Could the organism still be viable, or would it by now be ready to be thrown into that proverbial dust-bin of history, into which Marxists traditionally rejects any notion not harmonizing with the inevitable flow of History? To that question we will return presently.

To Marx a man has only his labour to sell. The capitalist pays only a certain fraction of that intrinsic value, just enough to keep the body and soul together of the man, at least for the time being; while the rest he expropriates, thus above a certain amount, the worker is slaving for his master. This picture certainly makes concrete the forces of exploitation at its most basic, and as such seductive in its simplicity and power of explanation. But is it really true Wilson asks? Does there exist such a thing as an intrinsic value of labour? Materialistic and unsentimental economic theory should instead teach that there is no such thing as intrinsic value at all, that the price paid is exactly the price that someone is willing to pay and the other to accept, reflecting the conviction that trade is a free and voluntary transaction between consenting adults²². Still, regardless of your views on trade, the idea of labour existing as a potential ready to be exchanged at a fair rate, is a bit naive. Without the opportunity to work, the potential to work is useless. Wilson consequently,

²⁰ First of May demonstrations is a case in point. Originally literally undertaken at your own peril opposing a formidable foe, it is nowadays more often than not a manifestation of political power opposing what? Thus it has been reduced to something of a religious ritual, the parts of which once had definite meaning, but now only serve a symbolic function.

²¹ And once again the ambiguous status of Engels cannot be ignored.

²² Of course this is a moral simplification. Even in trade there is cheating and duplicity, and above all a lack of complete information

yet without excessive rancour²³ dismisses this basic pillar of Marx theory as unsound. Of course Wilson counter arguments appear sound, yet one should keep in mind that in matters economical it is hard to come up with truly objective and scientific standards, and rejection of an economic idea can usually be attributed to the fact that it does not fit with an already accepted economic paradigm²⁴. Ironically what makes the notion of an intrinsic value more reasonable, is in a feudal setting. When it comes to intrinsic contradictions in capitalism it is far harder to refute Marx. Part of it is of course formal in the sense that everybody can easily come up with irrefutable statements which only exceptionally prove to be of any depth. Yet for a long time during the 20th century the collapse of Capitalism seemed if not imminent at least reasonable. The great crash of 1929 was an obvious case in point, a slump that did not affect the Socialist economy of the Soviet Union as it was observed²⁵. The contradiction of capitalism, as seen by Marx, consists in that Capitalisms needs to continually grow and find new markets. On one hand it needs to get labour as cheap as possible, on the other hand it needs consumers. Obviously the two sets cannot be separated but do eventually become identified. Thus the arguments are very reasonable, going to the quick of our notion of the ultimate futility of production for its own sake. Sustained exponential growth, still the goal and criteria of any functioning economy, is in the long run an absurdity. But so far Capitalism, with obvious modifications, has proved itself unexpectedly resilient. And as to the limits of growth, most Capitalists have too short a horizon to really worry about such things. To the analytic mind of a Marx, the idea of proving intrinsic inconsistency must have been a heady experience, close to the one a mathematician gets by predicting the world by 'pure' thinking.

Wilson attributes the main fallacy of the thinking of Marx and Engels to their profound misjudgement of human nature. For this Marx is probably mainly responsible. It is reasonable to guess that Marx would have been aghast at the modern consumer society and at the bourgeois tastes of the proletariat when finally coming into resources. Wilson enumerates the simple pleasures and needs the common man wants to be satisfied and notes that in the States they are coming into general realization. Hobsbawm fifty years later speculates that maybe after all modern society, with its affluence, might after all be as close to the Communist Paradise as one can expect. Marx, for all his philosophical materialism was hardly a materialistic fellow, wedded as he was to a culture of education. It is a common misunderstanding, Wilson notes, to believe that Marx and Engels postulated base materialistic causes for all manifestations of culture. On the contrary they spent a lot of time to try and explain how such higher activities like mathematics and poetry could come about. Engels defence of the classics could serve many a modern educator

²³ He disparages the ostensible naivety of Engles and Marx, seriously thinking that a maker of say a Persian carpet pushing his ware on them, would only demand a price commensurate with the amount of work and effort that went into its manufacture, rather than gambling at trying to get as much as he can get away with.

²⁴ The situation may be similar in the case of Natural Science to the delight of many a Post-Modernist. However, for those of us who swear by the falsifiability criteria of Popper the situation is profoundly different as long as simple tests can be designed that do not depend on the paradigms themselves

²⁵ Needless to add in retrospect, the Soviet economy was in a more or less permanent crisis by itself, although this was not obvious to the West

as an inspiration of how to promote a liberal education. After all the ultimate point of revolution was to free man from his materialistic appetites, to allow him to escape the basest and most abominable passion he is capable of, namely that of the furies of personal interest²⁶.

So what is left of Marx if his philosophy turns out to be metaphysical rubbish, his economics misguided? His historical analysis? Hobsbawm swears by him presenting him as the Darwin of modern history. Wilson hails his 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' as a masterpiece. A masterpiece because it is history explained by a few principles, the unfolding of which gives to a complex process a deep satisfaction of the inevitability, which is the essence of understanding²⁷. Unfortunately Wilson does not elaborate, and thus, as noted above, the most interesting aspects of Marx and his writing are only alluded to²⁸.

Marx was politically active, in fact his very involvement in the various Communist Internationals, made him as a pure philosopher to stand out. Yet the implementation of his ideas would be performed by other men at other locations. Lasalle and Bakunin have been referred to above, but for all their charm and intermittent connections²⁹, they made no lasting impact. It is now the scene moves to Russia, marginal to the interest of Marx, who learned to his surprise that the first translation of 'Das Kapital' was not into English but into Russian. Russia had a long tradition of terrorism. A radical political activity blending with petty criminality. The terrorism of Tsarist Russia was admittedly a more civilized version of what has become the horror of the public imagination in the early 21st century. More civilized as its victims were more closely targeted. The spectacular achievement being the assassination of Alexander II. A feat that invited repetition. It is now Wilson introduces us to the family Ulyanov living in the small town of Simbirsk by the banks of the Volga. Wilson paints the scene vividly making us aware of the vast distances of Russia and its backwardness. The stratification of the city, its muddy streets and gloomy buildings. The Ulyanivs were well-off, the father being in a position of authority as a headmaster³⁰. Many siblings, of which Vladimar Ilyich, was a younger brother emulating his older. Both brothers were very good at school, especially the older, who had a marked interest and ability for Natural History. He set off to the University finding himself in radical circles, involving himself in the manufacture of a bomb meant for the Tsar. The plot was unravelled and he ended up in court, eventually hanged. As we read of it we

²⁶ Repeatedly quoted by Wilson. Also amplified by the observation that Marx more than anybody else has pointed out the seemingly infinite capacity we have to become oblivious or indifferent to the pains we inflict on others when we have a chance of getting something out of them for ourselves.

²⁷ Earlier on in the book, Wilson writes with admiration of Marx and Engels having so quickly assimilated the social and historical thinking of the time, emerging with a complete and coherent theory which cleared up mysteries of the past, simplifying complications of the present, and opened up to the contemplation of the future a more practicable path of inquiry.

²⁸ Wilson also is lyrical about 'Das Kapital', noting that it is the power of his imagination as well as the cogency of arguments, that makes the book such compelling reading. Once again failing to exemplify.

²⁹ Lasalle had talks, and possibly some influence with Bismarck, but was, to his great chagrin, dropped by him when no longer useful.

³⁰ As fate would have it, Kerenskys father was a headmaster too in the vicinity, and would play a supportive rôle to the young Ulyaniv, when he was becoming ostracized due to the activities of his brother.

invariably think it is a shame. Such a waste of talent. On the other hand, had he been saved his cruel fate and been allowed to realise his potential, we would most likely never have heard of him. Talented people, even brilliant people are proportionally rare, yet in absolute number too numerous to allow everyone of them a claim to our attention. Instead the younger brother became the head of the household in view of the early death of the father from a stroke³¹ brought about, Wilson speculates, by over-work. It would be silly to speculate whether the Russian Bolshevik Revolution would not have happened, had Lenins brother not been executed and thereby confirmed Lenin in his commitment. In one sense human history is a chain of fortuitous happenings, any one of which by its absence would profoundly have changed history. Thus in that sense all of us owe our very existence to the precise unfolding of events prior to our birth. It is the role of the serious historian, as opposed to the mere chronicler, to identify the stable currents. What can be said more generally is that in Russia by the time of Lenin there had developed a new type of occupation, that of the professional revolutionary, and Lenin was only one among many, subsequent events having brought him a distinction that at the time was far from obvious.

It would be tedious to detail the events of Lenins rise to power. As a professional revolutionary, committed to the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, he was, like his comrade to be - Trotsky, for long periods exiled to Siberia. In retrospect such exiles appear quite idyllic, at least when compared to the Gulag. Repressive as the Tsarist regime was, in comparison with what would follow, it does appear benign. Lenins exiles were not all involuntary, in later years he would seek refuge on his own in Europe, spending time in London and Switzerland, a frequent attender of various Communist congresses. Wilson refers to his involvement with the Social Democratic party, which is somewhat confusing to the uninitiated reader. Was not Social Democracy a revisionist split off, relinquishing revolution as a road to be travelled and instead seeking to take advantage of liberal reforms allowing more universal suffrage? Anyway somewhere along the line there was a split, the split into Bolshevism and Menshivism, supposedly crucial to the power-basis of Lenin. The rest is history, as it is usually expressed. When the Tsar was overthrown in March 1917 Lenin was abroad reading about it in the newspapers. German authorities, aware of his opposition to the war, were helpful in allowing him transit through Germany in a sealed railway car. He detoured via Stockholm and Helsinki, and arrived in Petrograd at the Finland station. Events, during those tumultous and confused times, came quickly upon each other.

Lenin tried to make some contribution to Marxism, most well-known is his elaboration on the theme of Capitalism and Colonialization as the last desperate struggle of the the former. But, as Wilson notes, he was not an intellectual in the sense of Marx, he took no pleasure in thought for its own sake, all his arguments and thinking always had a very practical intention. That of appropriating and consolidating power. What to do with power once secured is quite another matter³². Wilson refers to Lenin as the most selfless of

³¹ Obviously hereditary as Lenin himself would be incapacitated at a relatively young age by a stroke as well.

³² The case of NEP in the early twenties is an example of ideological confusion. But according to Wilson those were pushed by Trotsky (as an example of political realism?) against the initial opposition of Lenin (based on ideological rigidity?)

men, totally indifferent to playing the great man of history³³, yet he admits that History, spelled with a capital H. was very much on his mind and his conception of his role.

May (7-8) 10, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

³³ A contemporary observer noted that lenin looked more like a grocer than a leader of men.