INTRODUCTION

The roots of twentieth-century communism can be found in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution and the Babouvist movement mark the transition from the ‘early’ communism to the ‘modern’ form of communism, shaped primarily by Marx, Engels et al. The monumental impact of events in France between 1789 and 1799, and the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation in Great Britain and continental Europe provoked a series of widespread and often violent upheavals across Europe and beyond: economically, socially, politically, philosophically and culturally. In common with the periodic appearance of utopian communalist thinking prior to 1789, communist thinking in the nineteenth century arose out of a period of crisis and upheaval. This took many forms: theoretical speculations, pamphleteering, political agitation and the creation of new communities built along communal lines. Communism developed alongside the growth of industrial society, as both moral criticism and political nemesis. One of the distinctive features of ‘modern’ communism was that it was more than just a set of doctrinal speculations or localised communal experiments. It was to become a full-scale political movement challenging the existing order in its entirety.

Marx and Engels clearly stand out as central figures in the development of communism as both a political doctrine and a political movement. Their views are best understood not just in terms of the logic of their own development, but also as arising out of debates with their contemporaries: people like Fourier, Saint-Simon, Owen, Sismondi, Cabet, Proudhon, Blanqui and others (Taylor, 1982).
THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNISM AND SOCIALISM AFTER 1789

The period between 1789 and c.1850 was an extremely fertile time ideologically speaking. The age of modern ideologies had dawned: liberalism, nationalism, socialism and communism all made their first appearances on the political stage (Hobsbawm, 1992). The emergence of capitalism, the demise of feudalism and the rise of economic individualism provided the impetus for the growth of ideologies critical of these new developments: socialism and communism. The extension of economic exploitation, poverty, wage labour and the division of labour encouraged a sense of rebellion against injustices and inequalities. How, though, can we distinguish between socialism and communism?

If we take the ideological spectrum at this point, then it would look something like this:

Liberalism ———— Socialism ———— Communism

Socialism bridges the divide between liberalism and communism, sharing some elements with both ideologies. By highlighting what was shared and what was unique about these different ideals, it becomes possible to identify the broad contours of communism as it emerged at this time. The basic starting-point was the attitude towards the newly emerging industrial system. Although critical of liberalism and capitalism, in its early stages socialism accepted industrialisation but was critical of the particular form it had taken. It had become too individualistic and exploitative. The early socialists aspired to the reform of capitalism, through humane legislation and enlightened government (Lichtheim, 1975).

How can we distinguish between socialism and communism? Both socialism and communism shared a critical attitude towards capitalism and liberalism. However, whereas the early socialists only went so far as to advance a moral critique of capitalism’s excesses and injustices, communism’s starting-point was this moral line, and developed into a wholesale critique of industrial society. What distinguished socialism and communism, then, was the critique offered of capitalism, the alternative put forward to capitalism and the means of expressing their protest and achieving their aims. The distinctive aspects of the communists were their radical egalitarianism (a trait inherited from the Babouvists), their predominantly proletarian make-up, and their revolutionary means to achieve their aims, rather than peaceful and piecemeal reforms. The aim of the communists was to overturn, rather than reform society.
Communists and socialists: the French, British and Germans to 1847

The countries which produced most of the early examples of socialist and communist thinking were France and Great Britain (Germany joined a little later). There are good reasons for this. Both countries were experiencing profound change. The spread of the industrial revolution from Britain to Belgium and France and the emergence of a proletariat saw the first inklings of social conflict and protest. The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815 and the subsequent July Revolution in 1830 in Paris signified the rise of liberalism in Europe, and provoked reactions against the individualism which it seemed to be advancing. But the responses to this situation were numerous and diverse, including philosophical speculation, the creation of communist settlements and ideal communities, secret conspiratorial societies and revolutionary movements.

The figures most often seen as ‘utopian socialists’ rather than communists include thinkers and activists like Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and Robert Owen (1771–1858) amongst others (Taylor, 1982). As noted above, what united these thinkers was a desire to reform and improve the social and economic conditions in which people lived and worked, and generally they eschewed involvement in politics. They sought structures and organisations which would promote the happiness and welfare of individuals, rather than the competitive, individualistic world of capitalism and liberalism. Their vision was to create a world free of dynastic conflict, social strife and poverty, a world of international peace and collaboration. But there were significant differences between them.

Saint-Simon was an interesting figure. Although he is often classed amongst the socialists, much of his thought is not specifically socialist. His underlying approach was to promote the welfare and well-being of the people through extolling the virtues of large-scale organisation and scientific planning. His work Le Nouveau Christianisme (The New Christianity, 1825) attempted to fuse fraternalism and science to create a society of fairness and rationality. Bankers and financiers would be mobilised to take control of nation-states and so transform them into great productive corporations, linked together in a worldwide network. Saint-Simon’s vision — technocratic, industrial, technological, transnational — aimed to produce social harmony (Saint-Simon, 1975).

Owen and Fourier had very different visions from Saint-Simon and his followers (Kolakowski, 1978). They were essentially community-builders. They were animated by the desire to create an international network of local communities based on sociable and co-operative principles. They would overcome the competitive individualism of industrial society not by struggle or conflict, but by demonstrating the evident superiority of the communal life. Robert
Owen was a successful cotton manufacturer who moved to New Lanark in Scotland and set up a model community: good housing, proper sanitation, non-profit stores and excellent educational opportunities. The spread of his ideas led to the formation of communities based on his principles, the most famous of which was founded in New Harmony in Indiana in 1825, but which sadly fell apart due to internal dissensions not long after (Royle, 1998).

Fourier, a somewhat unorthodox figure, developed his idea that social harmony could be achieved if people were given the opportunity to pursue their passions. To enable this, he set up social organisations called ‘phalanxes’, an economic unit comprised of 1620 people. People would live in communal buildings, and would work according to their natural inclinations. The phalanstery would combine both industrial and agricultural work, and would operate on a co-operative basis. Inequality and private property would not be eliminated, but would be rendered non-antagonistic. Between 1841 and 1859 about 28 colonies were set up in the USA along the lines set out by Fourier (Kolakowski, 1978). In spite of the obvious differences between them, these early or utopian socialists shared many ideas. They were all opposed to individualism, laissez-faire and competition. Instead they wished to promote co-operation, the production and distribution of wealth to benefit all, and the importance of education as a means of creating sociable citizens and harmonious societies. Within their doctrines, there was no call for the abolition of private property, radical egalitarianism or class struggle. This provides the dividing-line between the socialists and the communists in this period.

Perhaps the main figure who straddles the divide between the utopian socialists and the communists was Etienne Cabet (1788–1856) (Johnson, 1974). Cabet developed a theory of communism in his book *Voyage en Icarie*, which depicted an ideal society in which an elected government controlled all economic affairs and in which all things were held in common. Cabet’s followers, who became known as Icarians, set up ideal communities in the USA in the 1840s. ‘Communism’ as a concept began to circulate in France in the ferment created after the 1830 revolution, but emerged in the 1840s to designate those groups who adhered to the views of Cabet. At this point, the term had a number of connotations, particularly within France. The term ‘communism’ invoked both the notion of the ‘commune’: a decentralised, local self-governing form of social organisation, and also ‘community’: a group of people sharing all things in common. In opposition to the socialists, the ‘communists’ emphasised revolution, militancy, class struggle and radical egalitarianism.

The origins of communism as an organised movement which emphasised and propagated these themes can be traced to the 1830s (Cole, 1958). In 1836 in Paris a small group of German exiles formed the League of the Just,
COMMUNISM

dedicated to carrying on the Babouvist tradition of revolution and radicalism. Members of this group were involved with an insurrection in Paris in May 1839, led by August Blanqui, a radical figure who harked back to the revolutionary tradition of the Jacobins. When this attempted coup failed, the League of the Just was broken up and disappeared underground. The communist flame was kept alive in the cities of London, Brussels and Paris by workers’ educational societies. Moves to link these different groups together into an international organisation began in the early 1840s. Josef Moll travelled from London to Brussels to enlist the help of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In the summer of 1847, a meeting took place to set up a League of Communists, which would in the first instance be German but which would become international in the long run. It was also decided that the League needed a manifesto. This task was entrusted to Marx. It was completed, with Engels, by January 1848, just as revolution broke out across continental Europe in that most momentous of years.

Before turning to look in some detail at the ideas of Marx and Engels, it is worth pausing to summarise what we have learnt so far about communism and the communist movement. In addition to notions of radical egalitarianism, communal ownership and distribution to the benefit of the masses, communism was revolutionary, militant, not averse to the use of violence and committed to a class-based struggle for power. Communists were not just more radical in the economic sphere, they were also far more committed to the struggle for political power, to direct action in the political arena, unlike the socialists at this time who wanted to work for the peaceful, long-term transformation of society. Communists wanted to overturn the existing distribution of power and wealth. The year 1848 seemed to suggest that just such a confrontation was in the offing.

1848: REVOLUTION AND THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

Before looking in detail at the totality of Marx’s writings on communism between 1844 and 1882, it is worth dwelling a little on the content of the Manifesto of the Communist Party [Doc. 3, p. 129] (Marx and Engels, 1848). This remarkable little pamphlet provides us with a summary of a particular form of revolutionary communism, one which was to exert enormous influence over the communist movement (although its immediate impact was barely discernible). But it was not just a set of principles, it was also a political manifesto designed to create a particular type of political movement. It was thus a polemical piece, shaped in part by the authors’ desire to make a break with, or distinguish themselves from the views of the utopian socialists, Icarian
communists, Blanquists and others. In this way, we can see how Marx and Engels’ ideas at times drew upon existing traditions and values, and at other times represented a distinct break from the ideas of their contemporaries. The content of the Manifesto was the outcome of a series of pieces written in the latter half of 1847, including two pieces (written in the form of questions and answers) by Engels (Engels, 1847a and b) [Doc. 4, p. 130]. The Communist Manifesto was divided into four main sections. The opening section looked at the rise of the bourgeoisie. Section two examined the role of the communists in the coming revolution and their relation to the proletariat as a whole. The third and fourth parts comprise an assortment of critiques and blasts at a variety of socialist thinkers and strands. Although it has become famous for some of its memorable lines (‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ or ‘WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!’) it also contains some crucial details on the nature of communism as a doctrine and a political movement. By setting out a range of communist principles – on topics like property, labour, education, the nation-state, the family – as well as the tactical and strategic mechanisms by which this society could be reached, Marx and Engels helped to focus the various strands of working-class protest and to define the meaning of communism in an industrial society. It was to become the first systematic depiction of the strategy, tactics, philosophy and world-view of communism in the modern era.

To the question, ‘what is communism?’, Engels gave the following answer: ‘Communism is the doctrine of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat’ (Engels, 1847a). The conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat meant the removal of those conditions exploiting and oppressing the workers, and the creation of those conditions which would liberate and emancipate the workers. The overall aim of the communists was,

To organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society. (Engels, 1847b: 92)

Their immediate aim was to form the proletariat into a class, overthrow the supremacy of the bourgeoisie and have the proletariat seize political power. To clear away the conditions oppressing the workers, Marx and Engels posited the following as the distinguishing features of communism:

1. The abolition of private property.
2. The abolition of buying and selling (and the consequent disappearance of money).
3. The abolition of the division of labour.
4. The abolition of the personal appropriation of the products of labour.
5. The abolition of countries and nationality.
6. The abolition of the family.

These measures would remove the basis for the exploitation of the workers, and open the way for the emancipation and all-round development of the workers. The transition would be a gradual one, but would eventually result in a society where

- production was run by society as a whole: for the good of society, according to a social plan;
- common use of all the instruments of production;
- common distribution of all products;
- labour as a means of enriching and promoting the life of the worker;
- communal education of children;
- openly legalised community of women.

How did they envisage the transition from the present to the communist future unfolding? This would take place in a number of stages, starting with the proletariat seizing political power from the bourgeoisie (this would have to be a simultaneous revolution on an international scale, encompassing, according to Engels, Great Britain, the USA, France and Germany), and leading to the seizure of all capital and the centralisation of all elements of production in the hands of the state. This would necessarily mean ‘despotist’ measures (as the ruling class never gives up without a fight), and vary from country to country. But, in the most advanced countries, Marx and Engels outlined that certain measures – for example creation of a national bank, state control of communications, transport and the means of production, abolition of child factory labour – would be necessary (Marx and Engels, 1848). The eventual outcome of this process would be a society whereby ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (Marx and Engels, 1848: 60).

In sum, a number of points stand out. First, the essential defining feature of communism was a negative one: the abolition of private property. This had enormous consequences for those who sought to realise Marx’s vision, concentrating energies on the destruction of capitalism, rather than on the creative act of making a communist society a reality. Second, the ultimate aim was a harmonious society of free, fully rounded, altruistic, sociable individuals. Third, scarcity would be abolished: ‘this development of industry will provide society with a sufficient quantity of products to satisfy the needs of all’ (Engels, 1847a: 91). Fourth, to achieve the society of material
satisfaction and freedom required a transitional stage of political struggle, class conflict and despotic measures.

MARX AND ENGELS ON SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM

The views contained in the writings of Marx and Engels for the creation of the manifesto of the Communist League in 1847 were not Marx and Engels’ first speculations on this topic. Between 1844 and 1847, Marx wrote about the future society in Private Property and Communism in the 1844 Paris Manuscripts, and The German Ideology (with Engels in 1845) [Doc. 5, p. 131]. After 1848, the views of Marx and Engels did not undergo any major reassessment (except when the experience of the Paris Commune suggested that the workers would have to destroy the state, rather than just seize it and use it for their own ends). What we see after 1849 is greater detail and discussion of some of these points, but no major innovations or revisions. The main texts were The Civil War in France (1871), The Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875), and sporadic references in Grundrisse and Capital.

The future society: an overview

The term ‘communism’ has a number of different meanings in Marx’s writings. Marx used the term ‘communism’ in four ways:

- the stage which will succeed capitalism;
- the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production;
- the negation of the alienation, exploitation and the oppression of the worker;
- a set of positive characteristics, including the emancipation of humanity, an increase in the productive forces in society, and the all-round development of the individual.

(de George, 1981)

Within Marx’s view of communism there were both ethical components (emancipation, freedom, co-operation etc.) and also structural features of the future society. This cluster of ideas led to a number of different interpretations of Marxist communism emerging, as many variants could quite legitimately be identified from the different ways in which Marx described ‘communism’ in his writings. Marx and Engels also sketched in outline the manner in which the post-capitalist society progressively unfolded. The post-capitalist society contained three different stages (although the periodisation was itself
COMMUNISM

a little murky): the dictatorship of the proletariat, socialism (the ‘lower’ phase of communism) and full communism (the ‘higher’ phase). The dictatorship of the proletariat was the regime which would rule in the period after the proletarian revolution. But what did Marx (and Engels) mean by this term? How long would it last? In the Critique of the Gotha Programme [Doc. 6, p. 131], Marx identified the ‘lower’ phase of communism (later termed ‘socialism’ by Engels), as a prolonged historical period, in which capitalist society would be negated, as the foundations of capitalist exploitation were removed (Marx and Engels, 1875). This, however, was a transitional phase. The negation of the features of capitalist society would gradually evolve into the positive features of communist society, as socialism was transformed into full communism. Under this ‘higher’ phase, the individual becomes the conscious master of nature, and of his/her destiny.

The future society: the ‘lower’ phase

The lower phase was marked by elements of continuity with capitalism: classes, the division of labour, wage labour and elements of inequality would still exist as remuneration would be carried out ‘according to work done’. But the process of transformation gets underway simultaneously, as the exploitative features of capitalism – the market, private property – are negated and replaced by structures which promote a communist society. These include:

- the abolition of private property and its replacement with public ownership;
- the means of production are brought under central direction and control;
- measures are adopted to foment the most rapid possible development of the productive forces (which include the means of production, the labour process, technological innovations and so on).
  (Marx and Engels, 1848: 52–53)

The politics of the transition period were slightly more complex. For Marx the state under all previous societies was an organ of class rule. It was used by the ruling class in any epoch to oppress other classes and realise its own interests. It did this by posing its own particular interests as the embodiment of the interests of society as a whole. One of the primary tasks of the socialist revolution was to destroy the basis of political exploitation, and thereby create the opportunity to build a society without a state. How did Marx envisage moving from the coercive state apparatus under capitalism to a non-class, non-state society? Marx’s views on the post-revolutionary state were guarded, except in his writings on the Paris Commune in The Civil War in France, and
ambiguous. At one point Marx talks about the need to smash the state and move immediately to a form of administration based on the Paris Commune: ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes’ (Marx and Engels, 1871: 285). At other points (and Marx is noticeably silent on the Paris Commune after 1871) it is necessary during the transition to the ‘higher phase’ that the proletariat are able to wield power through a coercive organism: the dictatorship of the proletariat. Its function is to oppress the bourgeois classes, and appropriate the means of production for the common good. This entailed taking over and utilising the existing state machinery. This was a transitional state, though. As progress towards the higher phase unfolded, the need for a coercive state would disappear.

The meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Marx’s writings is very unclear. How long would the dictatorship of the proletariat last? What form of democracy did Marx envisage? How would the proletariat control the state? How would the state enforce its rule over the non-proletarian classes? How would the proletariat undertake the transformation of the economy? How would the proletarian dictatorship be transformed into the stateless society of the ‘higher’ phase of communism? Would it be abolished by the proletariat, as envisaged by Marx? Or would it ‘wither away’, as envisaged by Engels? All of these questions remained frustratingly undeveloped in Marx’s writings, although this has not stopped scholars from speculating at length!

The future society: the ‘higher’ phase

The unfolding of the historical process would lead inexorably from the lower to the higher phase of communist society. In a vivid passage, Marx describes how a communist society will be organised on the basis of ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ (Marx and Engels, 1871: 320–21).

Communism meant the full and final self-realisation of the individual: people were now in full control of their own destiny. The abolition of market forces promoted conscious rational control over the economy. All sources of alienation and inequality have been abolished: the social division of labour, classes, wage-labour, production for exchange-value and the coercive apparatus of the state. All the divisive dichotomies of capitalist society – mental/manual labour, town/country, male/female – would be overcome.

In economic terms, production is directed towards use-value, not profit. Ownership of the means of production is completely socialised. Developments in technology and labour productivity enable the production of a super-abundance of goods. This entailed the abolition of scarcity, which was to become a central goal of the Bolsheviks after 1917. Under communism there
COMMUNISM

is also a totally different approach to work. Individuals contribute according to their abilities, and draw from the common supply of goods to meet their needs. In his earlier writings Marx suggests that labour will be fulfilling, diverse and creative. The abolition of the social division of labour would be replaced by a voluntary division of labour:

while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowherd or critic.

(Marx, 1845: 169)

In his later works, labour has a slightly different status. Marx sets labour entirely within the ‘realm of necessity’ (the production of requirements necessary for biological survival). The time spent on work of this kind is greatly reduced by the growth in the productive forces, and by a voluntary division of labour arising from a process of education. This creates the preconditions for the ‘realm of freedom’, when individuals are able to develop their potential to their full ability, in their leisure time (Walicki, 1995: 86–87). According to Marx in Capital ‘the sphere of material production remains a realm of necessity, and the true realm of freedom begins only in leisure time’ (Marx, 1867: 512). In other words, people exercise their creativity and realise themselves not in work, but outside of work.

Politics no longer exists under communism. The destruction of the division of labour and of a class-based society removes the basis for a coercive state apparatus which will disappear eventually. In its stead there would be a non-political authority, or administration of communist society which is communitarian, democratic, participative and non-coercive.

Marx on socialism and communism: a summary

The dominant themes of Marx’s writings on socialism and communism were shaped by his world-view which synthesised various intellectual currents of the nineteenth century: rationalism, materialism, optimism. Marx had an optimistic view of humanity. Freed from the fetters and constraints of bourgeois society, individuals could live harmoniously with one another. Removing the basis for exploitation, and overcoming alienation would facilitate the emergence of a society of harmony, unity and voluntary co-operation. Human beings were essentially social beings, who discovered their true humanity in a social context. But Marx also saw production and the growth of productive power as the key
to unlocking this harmonious society. Developments in technology and production would enable scarcity to be abolished, and this was the crucial factor enabling the strife and exploitation of capitalism to be transcended. The final outcome of history was a society free from alienation, in which the individual realises him/herself fully, and becomes truly human for the first time.

The debates about the nature of the communist society envisaged by Marx and Engels, and the meaning of many of these unresolved issues died down after the 1870s. The energy and focus of socialist and communist parties and activists was channelled instead into paving the way either for reforms to capitalism to create a socialist system, or for the revolution that would overthrow capitalism and the rule of the bourgeoisie and inaugurate a proletarian state dedicated to the construction of a communist system. Marx had played a key role in this process before his death in 1883. Marx was not just an abstract thinker. He was also committed to political activism, to changing the world. Modern communism was not just a set of ideas. It also gave birth to a political movement, organised along international lines. After 1848, the moves to create a workers’ movement, transcending national boundaries, to advance the interests of the proletariat, began to gather pace. The spectre was assuming a collective form and beginning to organise itself to take on its oppressors.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT 1850–1915

The year 1848 was a key moment for the communist movement. The failure of the revolutions in France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Sicily, Naples, Lombardy, Venice and Rome was complete by the end of 1849/50. The failure of Cabet’s communitarian movement in the USA spelt the demise of the attempt to create an alternative civilisation within the confines of the existing system (with the exception of a variety of millenarian religious movements). What lessons did Marx and Engels draw from the events of 1848/49? Their position when the revolutions broke out was that the bourgeoisie, aided and abetted by the petit-bourgeoisie and the workers, would overturn the rule of European autocracies and the aristocracy. This would then lead quickly to a conflict between the workers and the bourgeoisie, culminating in a second revolution. But the workers had been let down by the ‘traitorous’ bourgeoisie. In their Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League in March 1850, Marx and Engels asserted three things. First, that the workers’ party must have the maximum degree of organisation, unity and independence, to prevent it being betrayed by the bourgeoisie in the future. Second, Marx reiterated that their aim must not ‘simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to
improve the existing society, but to found a new one’ (Marx and Engels, 1850).
Marx emphasised what distinguished the communists from the anarchists, and the socialists: revolutionary, not reformist; internationalist, not nationalist; class warriors, not class conciliators; abolishers, not mitigators of private property; centralists, not localists. Third, Marx and Engels called for ‘permanent revolution’, for an independently organised political party of the proletariat. It was to this end that attention was diverted after 1850.

The First International: 1864–73

The defeat of 1848 made the Communist League a banned organisation in France and Germany, and it moved its headquarters to London. Disputes amongst the leadership led to its effective demise. Marx moved the headquarters to Cologne, and the long work of preparing the workers for the conflict with the bourgeoisie was driven underground (Cole, 1958; Lichtheim, 1975). It wasn’t until 1862 that moves to revive an international workers movement began to gather pace. The origins of the first International Working Men’s Association (IWMA) is a complex one, involving the confluence of a number of different streams – trade unionism, workers’ solidarity, anti-slavery, factory reform, democratic republicanism – in a number of different countries (Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Poland). In November 1864 these came together when Marx was invited to deliver an Inaugural Address which was adopted as its statement of aims by the Geneva Congress in 1865. Marx highlighted two important features of the period between 1848 and 1863. First, the passage of factory reform acts demonstrated that if the workers organised themselves they could prevail in a struggle against the bourgeoisie. Second, the co-operative factory movement of the Owenites had demonstrated that production on a large scale could be carried out without a class of exploiters in charge, and that hired wage labour was destined to die out. However, he went on to state that,

the experience of the period 1848–64 has proved beyond doubt that, however excellent in principle and however useful in practice, co-operative labour . . . will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries.

(Marx, 1864)

The solution? To develop international proletarian solidarity and co-operative labour, the conquest of political power by the workers had to be achieved. This was the overriding goal of the labour movement. But should this be via a violent revolution? Or could it be achieved peacefully via the ballot box?
The demise of the IWMA came in the aftermath of the abortive Paris Commune in 1871. In March of that year, Parisian workers revolted and the uprising was not finally suppressed until 28 May 1871. The existence of many of the leaders of the IWMA in the uprising led many moderates to leave the organisation. After a great deal of dissension and disagreement, Marx moved the headquarters to the USA where it finally disappeared from view in 1876. The failure of the Paris uprising seemed to Marx to mark the end of the revolutionary ideals that he had worked for. He died in 1883 (Kolakowski, 1978).

It wasn’t until 1889 that the workers movement managed to regroup. On 14 July two broad groupings (a ‘Marxist’ one and a ‘non-Marxist’ one) agreed to join together, primarily to unite the French and German workers and so prevent a European conflict. It formally adopted the basic principles outlined by Marx in his earlier works – class struggle, international unity, proletarian action and the socialisation of the means of production – but in practice these ideas were open to a variety of interpretations, hence the Second International became an exceptionally broad church. There were two persistent fault-lines running through it: the tension between the reformist and revolutionary wings, and between the national and international advocates. The reformist strand grew much stronger across this period, especially in the areas where liberal democracy was becoming more established, as opportunities for electoral power and improvements to the lot of the workers through legislative means seemed to grow. The growth of ‘revisionism’ (a movement advanced by Eduard Bernstein arguing the need to revise or update Marxism in light of the changes to capitalism) seemed to herald the victory of reformism in the European labour movement. The victory of the nationalists over the internationalists seemed to be confirmed in 1914 when most socialists lined up behind their nation-states in the dreadful conflict of World War I. The year 1914 marked the great divide in the workers’ movement between the reformist socialists and social-democrats on the one hand, and the communists and revolutionaries on the other (Sassoon, 1997).

The revolutionary, internationalist flame was not totally extinguished, though. The radical wing, which led in 1917 to the victory of the communists in Russia, continued where the labour movement was confronted with authoritarian regimes, most notably in Russia. But it also maintained a presence in Western and Central Europe through the continued existence of radical voices and wings of ostensibly reformist movements. The centre of gravity of the communist movement shifted eastwards, however, and settled around the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), which was founded in 1898. Communism in the twentieth century cannot be understood without reference to the country and the party where it first came to power.
Marxism and communism in Russia: 1898–1917

The acknowledged founder of the Marxist movement in Russia was Georgi Plekhanov (Kolakowski, 1978). In 1883, he, along with Vera Zasulich and Pavel Axelrod, created the Emancipation of Labour Group in Geneva. In 1898, the RSDLP was formed in Minsk. The autocratic context of revolutionary politics meant that the party had to operate in a clandestine, conspiratorial manner. A tightly knit, relatively small organisation would be much more difficult to infiltrate, but also ran the risk of being an elitist, minority movement, detached from the masses. At the outset, it was marked by a high degree of internal conflict over specific components of revolutionary strategy, whilst sharing a set of common assumptions about the future of the post-revolutionary society. The key figure in the development of a Russian brand of Marxism, and for the subsequent history of communism in the USSR and beyond, was Lenin.

Lenin played a formative role in creating a type of revolutionary movement which was to be adopted across the world in the period after 1917 as a vehicle for communist parties attempting to seize power. This organisational pattern also became a blueprint for government once communist parties came to power. Lenin's approach emphasised three things. First, Lenin was uncompromisingly revolutionary, rather than reformist in his approach. Nothing should ever stand in the way of the revolution. All actions were judged against a single criterion: did it advance the revolutionary cause or not? Lenin's world-view was ruthlessly amoral. Any means justified the revolutionary end. Second, Lenin devised a model of the appropriate structure for a revolutionary party, a model which was shaped by Lenin's views on revolutionary consciousness and by the Russian context. Third, Lenin was uncompromisingly and fiercely internationalist in his outlook. He was deeply committed to the international revolution and to international proletarian solidarity.

The debates over party structure and revolutionary strategy were bitter ones indeed. Right from its birth, the RSDLP contained many factions. Just five years later, these factions resulted in the division of the RSDLP into two wings in 1903. The issue was one of party organisation. Divisions emerged over whether the party should be an elite vanguard of professional revolutionaries, or a mass movement. Lenin argued (in line with Plekhanov's earlier works) in What is to be done? [Doc. 7, p. 132] that the workers by themselves could only attain to 'trade-union consciousness', that is a concern with their immediate material needs (wages, conditions etc.) To attain to 'Social Democrat' (that is revolutionary) consciousness required a disciplined organisation of revolutionaries, armed with the 'correct' ideology who would lead and guide the workers:
Hence our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class movement from this spontaneous trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.

(Lenin, 1902: 40)

Clearly, there was an important practical aspect to this theory. A mass movement was inappropriate in the repressive conditions of Tsarism. The context of Lenin’s writings is also vital. The pamphlet was part of the wider polemical struggle with the ‘Economists’ (a group who favoured concentrating their energies on the workers’ struggle for better conditions in the factory). Although Lenin always stressed the importance of mass action, his conception of the revolutionary party was based upon the need for a dedicated revolutionary elite, armed with the correct ideology, who would lead the masses to revolution and guide the subsequent process of international revolution and the construction of a global communist system. Yet the stress on the need for a dedicated revolutionary elite separate from the mass movement caused a split at the 1903 Congress, where Lenin and Martov fell out over the definition of party membership (Service, 1985). Lenin prevailed at the Congress and subsequently became the dominant figure in Russian Marxism. The resulting division (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) created two wings of the RSDLP until 1912 when the split became final and irrevocable.

It was the Bolshevik (majority) grouping, led by Lenin, which was the most vocal in its criticisms of those European socialists who supported their governments in World War I. Committed to the doctrine of proletarian internationalism, the Bolsheviks remained deeply opposed to the conflict, and urged all workers and workers’ parties to oppose the conflict and to work for a democratic peace. The Bolsheviks were critical of European socialists who appeared to have taken the line of reformism and nationalism, rather than revolution and internationalism. In 1915, Lenin published a significant pamphlet, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin argued that the nature of capitalism had undergone a profound transformation. They were now living in an era of Imperial monopoly capitalism. The internationalisation of capitalism had created a situation where all the capitalist economies were interlinked and interdependent. Lenin was quick to see the revolutionary implications of this. He argued that as the capitalist countries were now interdependent, the international proletarian revolution might break out in the ‘weakest link’ in the Imperial chain (i.e. Russia), rather than the most advanced capitalist countries (i.e. Great Britain or Germany) as argued by Marx. The overthrow of capitalism in Russia would provoke, domino-like, a series of revolutions across Europe. The outcome? Global revolution. Revolution in Russia was now on the agenda.
Although Lenin had changed the sequence of the outbreak of revolution, and had established a central role for the party in the revolution itself, he remained committed to Marx’s key principles of a communist movement: international unity, class struggle, socialisation of the means of production and egalitarianism. The movement sought to eradicate all forms of discrimination and injustice: gender, nationality, and class. All Russian Marxists maintained their allegiance and loyalty to Marx’s vision of communism. What was unclear in the period before 1917 was how they would get to this state from where they were: war-torn, socially divided, economically underdeveloped Russia. This transitional phase – otherwise known as socialism – raised critical questions: should the capitalist state be captured or smashed? How, and by whom, should political power be exercised? How would the economy be organised on the road to communism? How could international revolution be carried out in Europe? [Doc. 8, p. 133] All these questions had to be resolved after October 1917, alongside the small task of retaining power and winning a civil war. The Bolsheviks were about to take their first steps in the realisation of their vision: to make the whole world communist.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNISM BEFORE POWER

Does ‘modern’ communism have anything in common with the earlier form of communism? Clearly lines of continuity can be traced between the two. The commitment to radical egalitarianism, and the desire to build social and economic structures and organisations which promoted communalism were both reproduced in the communism which emerged in the nineteenth century amidst the flux of industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of the proletariat. But these elements of continuity look very different if we scratch beneath the surface and examine the context, rationale and the meaning of these terms. The egalitarianism and communalism of ‘early’ communism was derived from an aspiration to alleviate the suffering of the poor and oppressed. Although ‘modern’ communism was concerned with the suffering of the masses, its aim was to emancipate the masses, not to alleviate their suffering. The communal experiments of early communism were essentially agrarian, whereas the ‘modern’ communist movement was an urban movement, concerned with redressing the unequal distribution of power and wealth between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

But ‘modern’ communism also marked a break with the earlier ideals at a deeper level, in terms of scope, means and aims. ‘Modern’ communism sought to replace the existing society rather than to create alternative communities living counter-culturally as examples of a different type of society. Modern
communism became, especially after the Babouvists, an organised political movement striving to effect change, rather than theoretical speculations or fantastical dreamings from the imaginations of thinkers or philosophers. Although this continued through the writings and example of Cabet, Fourier, Owen and others, these all died down by the mid-nineteenth century and communism became a movement for the emancipation of the workers. ‘Modern’ communism, because of industrialisation and the rise of the nation-state and imperialism, became an international movement, rather than an eclectic collection of local expressions sporadically punctuating the historical stage. Modern communism ceased to be derived from an essentially religious world-view, and instead became a secularised political movement. Modern communism, as specified by Marx, looked to create a new society in the future, rather than looking backwards to restore a ‘lost’ golden age. In sum, modern communism was a movement which sought to overthrow capitalism and create the conditions for the emancipation of all peoples from the various forms of oppression which assailed them, and so create a world of harmony, co-operation and equality.