

# Rereading The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: The Phenomenon of Bonapartism as a Capitalist State Without Popular Representation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the character of so-called Bonapartism through the development of the class struggle in the period between 1848 and 1851. The perspective adopted is that in contrast to what is stated in the classics (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci) of Marxism, Bonapartism is neither a form of politics imposed from the exterior against all social classes, nor is it a manifestation of the state's autonomy vis à vis the bourgeoisie (Poulantzas). On the contrary, it is a characteristic form of the bourgeois state, which does not have parliamentary institutions among its constituent elements. On the basis of this argumentation, one can understand the current tendency of limited representative relations, which benefits state-controlled mechanisms that are independent of popular control

**KEYWORDS:** state, Marx, capitalism, Bonapartism, class struggle, bourgeoisie

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to approach analysis of the nature of the State in capitalism through an examination of the class struggle in France in the period between 1848 and 1851, that is to say of the phenomenon that has come to be called Bonapartism. To aid with understanding of the historical context of the events, Marx's classic analyzes will be utilized, as will texts by present-day researchers.

What we will attempt to show is that developments in this period are epitomized by the fact that the French social formation was passing through the stage of consolidating capitalist relations of production, a process generating some superstructural turbulence up to the time that all factions of the French bourgeoisie could feel that they had some presence in it. This is in contrast to what happened in the last years prior to the 1848 uprising. At that time, bank capital in collaboration with a section of the parliamentary elite spearheaded the state securities, affecting significantly other bourgeois factions such as the industrial and commercial

capital. The reaction of these bourgeois factions in alliance with the proletariat and the peasantry is what led to the 1848 revolution. The division of the bourgeoisie into distinct segments with particular interests played an important role in the developments of the period.

The composition of the Bonapartist state did not amount to some special type of State reflecting a balance between two opposing social coalitions, as the Marxist classics claim. It was a cruder political variant of bourgeois domination largely divested of the trappings of representation of the dominated classes and their interests. The phenomenon of Bonapartism shows that a bourgeois state, if it is to be such, should reflect the interests of all factions of the bourgeoisie, without it being necessary for representative institutions to be in operation. In other words, Bonaparte's victory constitutes not a victory over all social classes, but rather the ascendancy of an authoritarian model of the bourgeois state over relations of representation. It is a development which cannot in any way be regarded

as being against what Marx called the “great mass” of the bourgeoisie. This observation helps us to see that the “caesarist” traits of Bonapartism are also linked to the present-day trajectory of the authoritarian State where the relations of representation (the power of the parliament) are restricted, to the advantage of centres impervious to popular control.

From this viewpoint it becomes understandable how this supposed class equilibrium, overseen by an individual whom Marx regarded as a buffoon, lasted for two decades, given that it represented a form of class domination rather than the manifestation of individual initiative in favourable social conditions. It is also not hard to interpret why sections of the lumpenproletariat actively supported Bonaparte, inspired by his struggle with some of the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, albeit not with its hard core, the overwhelming majority of its economic agents. Last but not least, the transformations to be described provide an interpretation more comprehensive than a mere mention of the bourgeoisie’s tendency to weaken the institutions of political representation, concerning the French proletariat’s inability to form a politically and organizationally unified collective to challenge, with a plan and a program, the designs of Bonaparte and the bourgeoisie.

This approach helps to understand the relatively recent developments in the State where representation relations (the power of the Parliament) decline for the benefit of unelected government (technocratic staff, government advisers, public administration experts) and supranational institutions (credit rating agencies, the European Central Bank for euro countries, the World Bank etc.).

### General Context of the Era

In this section we present the outline of the basic economic and social parameters characterizing French society on the eve of the 1848 uprising and continuing to sustain it as it unfolds.

Before we embark on this, however, there is a question that needs to be answered, concerning the nature of the French social formation at that time. Is it a capitalist social formation or something else, given the majority status of the rural strata and the strong state bureaucracy? If the “something else” applies then the whole discussion about a capitalist state that

called upon Bonaparte to co-operate and/or confront the bourgeoisie has no meaning. Questioning of the capitalist character of the French state is a view associated with Comninel and corroborated precisely by the majority status of the rural strata that would ultimately support Bonaparte (see below) but also by the special role played by the state bureaucracy in his rise to power (Comninel 1997, 203).

Mooers cites some data which, without his personally being led to such a conclusion, could justify the position that the French state was not at that time a capitalist state: three-quarters of the active population were farmers; there were just over a million of workers employed in establishments employing an average of ten workers. At the same time factors of rural economy such as demographic crises and famine had a significant effect on overall economic development (Mooers 1991, 83). But numerous figures highlight the consolidation of capitalism within the French social formation: France in 1850 on a number of indicators (production capacity of steam engines, coal consumption, crude iron production, raw cotton consumption) may have lagged behind Britain but it was clearly ahead

of Germany and Belgium. In the period between 1851 and 1853 it came fourth after Switzerland, Holland and England in per capita global trade, and third (with around 11 percent of the total) after the USA and Britain in annual national income per employee.<sup>1</sup> At that time England, France, Germany and the U.S. accounted for two-thirds of global industrial production, with the figure for France being 16 percent (Beaud 1981, 126). Between 1815 and 1850 industrial production increased by 2.8 percent, and the corresponding rural production by 1.9 percent,<sup>2</sup> so that in 1850, 29 percent of the GNP was generated in this way. In the same year the relevant figures for the UK were 35%, for Germany 21%, for Italy 19% and for Russia 10% (Trebilcock 1996, 51). Finally, very large production units had begun to be established. In 1834 the company Doltfus-Mieg et Cie employed 4,200 workers and Schneider at Le Creusot increased the workforce at its factory from 230 in 1812 to 3,250 in 1850 (Beaud 1981, 134).

1 For the relevant data see Clough- Rapp 1980 Vol II : 418; 431, 435, and Beaud 1981, 125.

2 Data compiled by Levy-Leboyer 1968, 796.

But the empirical/quantitative factor is the least important because in every social formation there are typically various coexisting, or to be more precise, interlocking modes of production, one of which predominates over the others.<sup>3</sup> This mode of production succeeds in constructing an edifice of maintenance-disintegration vis à vis the others, commencing at the economic level and subsequently expanding into the superstructure. In the France of 1850 the capitalist mode of production structured the economic process in accordance with its own priorities: an expansion of wage labour, the sale abroad of capitalist commodities, the gradual transformation of agricultural products from barter items into commercial goods, increasing involvement of the banking sector in the circuit of production, distribution and sale of goods, ever greater deployment of technological innovation in the production process.

Having clarified this issue, let's proceed to an outline of the economic and social conditions of the period. One key element is that in the reign of Louis Philippe a political and economic power complex had emerged comprised of bankers and their collaborators in parliament and the palace. The latter transferred to the former state secrets, knowledge of which led to sudden fluctuations in government securities, resulting in massive profits for the protagonists and major disasters for small capital holders. Great profits were generated at the same time from railway construction, government spending and state loans, and were channelled to the aristocracy of money and its political partners. Nevertheless "Trade, industry, agriculture, shipping, the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie, were bound to be continually endangered and prejudiced under this system" (Marx 2010, 15-16).

At the level of the working class, the situation was very bad, given that the law of Le Chapelier, contained in the Criminal Code of 1811, prohibited strikes and workers' unions (Beaud 1981, 135- 136). Temporary wage cuts in periods of industrial crisis were a frequent phenomenon, and working days could be as long as fourteen and fifteen hours. Children and women often worked as much as men, for very low wages (Tuma 1978, Vol II, 655).

This was the general framework of domination for this power bloc. Beyond that there are the specific factors that sparked the uprising of 1848: events such as the potato blight, the poor harvests of 1845 and 1846, the price rises of 1847, all exacerbating popular discontent. To these should be added the crisis in Britain. These factors taken together had the effect of inhibiting the extroversion of big French investors. Seeing the British crisis spreading into Central Europe, they preferred to invest in France, thereby causing suffering to many shopkeepers and small entrepreneurs.

All socially combustible material had accumulated in preparation for the outbreak of the 1848 uprising.

### The February Republic

The prohibition of a programmed demonstration on February 22 led to militant demonstrations and the setting up of barricades, with the majority of the National Guard refusing to intervene.

Louis Philippe dismissed the Prime Minister Guizot but the crisis sharpened when, on the evening of 23rd February, the guards of the Foreign Ministry shot and killed 16 demonstrators who were celebrating in the streets. After that the monarchical regime of Louis Philippe collapsed. A provisional government was formed which only under pressure from the workers' representatives proclaimed the Second French Republic. Universal suffrage was introduced for all men who had reached the age of 21, lived in the same house for the previous six months and had not forfeited their civil rights. The right to stand for public office, under the same provisos, was granted to males who had turned 25 years of age. This led to an increase in the number of voters, from 250,000 to nine million! Another pro-labour reform was the right of workers, with the help of the State, to establish production co-operatives (national workshops) that would distribute the profits of their labour. Also established, following agreement with the provisional government, was a committee of representatives of the trade unions. The national workshops aimed at absorbing the unemployed and those who worked in them were employed in public works. A little later the 10-hour working day was introduced in Paris, and 11-hour in the rest of France. Slavery was abolished in the overseas territories, complete freedom of the press was instituted and freedom of assembly

3 For a more detailed examination of the inter-articulation of modes of production see Poulantzas 1979, 22.

secured. The institution of “*marchandage*” (a form of contract labour) was abolished, as was imprisonment for debt. The assets of two railway companies were seized.

These are examples of the “left-wing” practices of the provisional government. Nevertheless, just because it was a government of very different, and conflicting, social interests, measures had to be taken that could serve as credentials with the world of capital, and particularly the banking elite, so that the government could be seen as working for the overall benefit of shareholders: Seeking to display its credentials to the economic elite and its world, the provisional government paid the interest on the securities to the state’s creditors before the expiry of the deadline for payment, thus encouraging a positive attitude to the government on the part of a critical mass of capitalists (Marx 2010, 21). Of course someone had to pay the bills for this pleasant surprise conferred upon State creditors. Thus the government would proceed to seizure of deposits exceeding 100 francs, converting them into unpaid state debt. This was an act that would enrage the petty bourgeois strata who now saw democracy working to the detriment of their interests. (Marx, 2010, 21).

At the same time, to enable state revenue to be increased from another source, the government decided to impose a further tax of 45 centimes in the franc in addition to the four direct taxes already paid by farmers, thus enraging them.

On the basis of this plethora of opposed and conflicting interests Marx concluded, correctly in my opinion, that the February republic was a bourgeois republic and could not be anything else, but under the pressure of action by the proletariat was obliged to proceed to a series of popular concessions. The proletariat for its part was not able to proceed beyond the constant demand that the promises made by the government must be kept, but even this limited political horizon made possible significant pressure to be exercised on the government, which did what it could not to carry out these promises. (Marx 2010, 25).

Thus in order to shield the new regime against any challenge from the proletarian side, the government hired 24,000 young soldiers who formed the mobile guard and came from the lumpenproletariat. They were a body of full-time employees, so that apart from

operating as policemen they also operated as a brake on unemployment (Agulhon 1983, 41).

But all this was still not enough. Just as in February a combative proletariat was required for democracy and its social concessions to be established, so now another fight was needed for the purpose of getting rid of them (Marx 2010, 25).

This direction would soon get under way when on April 15 the provisional government accused the representatives of the workers (Raspail, Blanc, Blanqui) of preparing to overthrow the government, seeking on the one hand to have the army withdrawn from the provinces and on the other to have a climate of fear generated in the other social strata. The second, and more substantial, blow was to come at the elections on April 23 when bourgeois democrats emerged as the victors, receiving the votes of the great majority of farmers, who were the numerically largest social stratum, comprising 64.5 percent of the economically active population, and considering themselves wronged because of the 45 percent tax increase that had been imposed on them (Tombs 1996, 380). The socialists, by contrast, exercised limited influence and elected only a small number of representatives in Paris, notably in areas where they were supported by moderates (Mastrogiannopoulos 2013, 279). In comparative terms the moderate republicans who agreed with the political line of the provisional government were in the majority, with approximately 500 representatives. There were about 250 royalists and 150 representatives who were positively disposed towards the socialist project. Thus, the winner of the election was the liberal bourgeoisie, as the majority voted for the provisional government’s program for liberal democracy without social revolution (Agulhon 1983, 45- 46).

### **May 4, 1848 to May 28, 1849**

The second period was that of the consolidation of bourgeois democracy. In that connection the National Assembly that was convened on May 4, 1848 intended to proceed with the repeal of previous pro-labour measures. This elicited a reaction from the workers, who demanded that a tax of one billion francs be imposed on the rich, that sections of the regular army be moved out of Paris, and that the French army not participate in the European bombardment of Poland (Tombs 1996, 382).

On May 15, in support of the demand for implementation of the demands of the proletarian layers, a raid on the National Assembly was launched, with subsequent arrest of the key representatives such as Raspail and Blanqui. Then, above and beyond the prohibition of popular assemblies, the institution of the national workshops was targeted through replacement of the daily wage by piece work, restrictions on the entry of workers into them, expulsion of unmarried workers and their drafting into the army. In essence it was the period of struggle of all other classes against the proletariat. The bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe was succeeded by bourgeois democracy, that is to say the political ascendancy of the entirety of the bourgeoisie. Of course, to achieve victory over the proletariat a social alliance had been created against it that encompassed the entire bourgeoisie, “the aristocracy of finance, the industrial bourgeoisie; the middle class; the small traders’ class; the army; the slums, organized as *Guarde Mobile*; the intellectual celebrities, the parsons’ class, and the rural population.” (Marx 2003, 19).

Faced with this alliance, the proletariat responded with the June Days Uprising, an extremely violent labour insurrection triggering bloody repression, with 3,000 workers killed by the troops of General Cavaignac in Paris and 10,000 in France as a whole. Thousands were injured and over 25,000 imprisoned or exiled. After the defeat of the workers’ insurrection the national workshops were abolished and those working in them had to enlist in the army or farm a plot of land in the provinces (Richards 2005, 162). The plan for purchase of the railways was withdrawn.

This defeat was to lead the proletariat “to the background on the revolutionary stage. It always seeks to crowd forward, so soon as the movement seems to acquire new impetus, but with ever weaker effort and ever smaller results.” (Marx 2003, 19). This occurred because of the enormity of the June defeat, because then all the classes and parties joined forces against the proletariat, the embodiment of the party of anarchy. The point is that this will not be confined to the proletariat. On the contrary, the pretext of order against anarchy will be used whenever a particular class feels that its own particular interests are threatened and reacts against this (Marx 2003, 21). Marx makes this observation in the light of the view that the state

apparatus under the leadership of Bonaparte possessed an ultimate autonomy. For our part, we agree with this Marxian observation but within the context of the overall functioning of the capitalist state as a key vehicle of political representation for the interests of the bourgeoisie. This means that the concept of the struggle for order against anarchy is not nebulous.

Its content is the contraposition of bourgeois order against anyone who threatens the interests of the *grande bourgeoisie*. The amalgamation of the interests of the bourgeoisie achieved through the February revolution is a decisive step towards the maturation of this class, which subsequently focuses on the removal of all obstacles that stand in the way of its uncontrolled sovereignty. The parliament and its functioning are one of them.

From June onwards the history of the Constituent Assembly was “the history of the sovereignty and dissolution of the democratic grouping of the bourgeoisie” (Marx 2003, 22). Through its mouthpiece, the Parisian *National* newspaper, it called for parliamentary democracy (which is why the delegates did not withdraw the decree on direct suffrage), defended economic protectionism, opposed the aristocracy of finance and despised socialism and communism. Politically, the convening of the National Assembly led to the exclusion of the socialist elements from the Executive Committee. The June Days uprising provided a pretext for expulsion of the Executive Committee and the democratic republicans who expressed the interests of the petty bourgeoisie. At the institutional level there began a process of cancellation of many popular legislative gains that had been enacted in the previous period: abolition of the law that limited the working day to ten hours, a return to imprisonment for debt, limitations on freedom of association, reintroduction of the security deposit for newspapers, rejection of the plan for taxation of capital in the form of a mortgage which had been prepared by the previous assembly.

Meanwhile the rupture proceeded in the alliance between bourgeois democrats and the petty bourgeoisie. The latter were in a dire economic position. In Paris more than 21 million francs in promissory notes were still awaiting payment, and in the provinces another 11 million francs. More than 7,000 commercial business owners had not paid their rent since February. A

request was then examined that creditors should accept a proportion of the sums owed and agree to postponement of payment for shopkeepers whose businesses had started recovering by February 24. But the fear that acceptance of this request would pave the way for new demands, and thus for political strengthening of the petty-bourgeoisie, led to its rejection by the National Assembly on January 22, 1848.

The above-mentioned developments might be seen as a victory for the bourgeois democrats but they created problems for the bourgeois layers because they ruined trade at a time when state expenses were increasing due to the cost of the June insurrection and state revenues were decreasing due to a contraction in production, dwindling consumption and falling imports. The only solution was to resort to renewed borrowing.

This makes it understandable how the exclusive sovereignty of the bourgeois democrats should have lasted only from June 24 to December 10, 1848. The vitiation of their power had already commenced from the moment of the establishment of the Presidential office, which came to share overall political responsibilities with the Legislative Assembly. On the one hand were the 750 representatives of the people who comprised the legislature, with upgraded powers such as the power to declare war or conclude commercial agreements. On the other was the President, who headed the executive, nominated and recalled ministers, appointed civil servants and had control of the army (Marx 2003, 26).

Although the motion proposing election of the President by the people passed easily, with 648 votes in favour and 158 against, the National Assembly, probably fearing excessive concentration of power in the hands of the President, ensured that he could not be re-elected, along with a range of prohibitive measures against the prospect of a coup being initiated by the President (Agulhon 1983, 68-69).

We see that this whole development, with conflicts within the parliament, dual power at the level of political decision-making, etc., unfolds within a context characterized by continuous contraction of institutional remnants of the means for registering popular claims within the state. This does not happen automatically, but gradually and by refraction, due to the particular importance of the introduction of

universal suffrage, making possible the emergence of individual social interests.

Recognition and management of those individual social interests is a cost to the bourgeoisie, whose desire would be to avoid payment for them, and which accordingly never ceases to struggle against it.

The adoption of the Constitution, which was finally approved by a vote of 793 votes to 30, created a peculiar equilibrium, the maintenance of which was undertaken by the President of the Republic himself, who within a few weeks would be Bonaparte. Marx comments on this development as entailing a fundamental contradiction. Political power is conceded through giving the right to vote to classes beyond the bourgeoisie, but they are required not to move on to social emancipation. By contrast the social power of the bourgeoisie is underwritten but this takes place on specific terms which it is expected not to overreach. (Marx 2010, 35) Marx thus recognizes a social equilibrium between opposing social forces, but we observe that it will very soon be modified precisely because under capitalism it is not the government but the state as a whole that exercises political power, with particular emphasis on its repressive mechanisms.

The Constituent Assembly, for its part, perceiving the growing discontent of the farmers, reduced indirect taxes on salt and alcohol and announced that it would not dissolve until it had passed ten organic laws, which would harmonize certain institutions with the new Constitution. In this way it sought not only to broaden its legitimacy but also to delay the holding of parliamentary elections, fearing the growing influence of monarchists. (Agulhon 1983, 74-75).

In any case on December 10th presidential elections were held where the bourgeois democratic choice Cavaignac received only 1,400,000 votes, as against the 5,400,000 that went to Louis Bonaparte, 370,000 to the left republican Ledru-Rollin, 37,000 to the socialist Raspail and 18,000 to Lamartine.

This victory of Louis Bonaparte and his appointment as President of the Republic were a reaction of the countryside against the city. It nevertheless also enjoyed support from the army, the petty bourgeoisie and the big bourgeoisie, who saw Bonaparte as a bridge to monarchy, and from proletarians as well, who rejoiced in the defeat of Cavaignac, the military

figure who had organized the suppression of the June Days uprising and won the adulation of the bourgeois democrats.<sup>4</sup> Other factors behind the emergence of Bonaparte included the prestige of his name among the broad peasant masses. In terms of mechanisms an important role was played by the church and the dignitaries whose influence won voters over to Bonaparte, whereas Cavaignac had the support only of the state's administrative machinery. (Agulhon 2006, 129). Not being a class, given that they maintained no political links and projected no common interest, the peasantry cannot represent themselves, so that someone else must come to represent them. The support for Bonaparte thus had basically conservative characteristics.

The period from December 20, 1848, when Bonaparte assumed office, until the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in May 1849, was one of the decline and fall of the bourgeois democrats. They were sidelined by the numerical mass of the bourgeoisie, who saw themselves represented by the party of order, in which were included representatives of the House of Bourbon and the House of Orleans.

At the same time there was an intensification of the struggle between the executive and the right-wing minority wing of the legislature and the corresponding centre-left majority over further legislative reforms that would end in the loss of the parliamentary majority and proclamation of elections on May 13, 1849.

The predominant feature of these elections, where 750 representatives were elected for a term of office of three years, was intense polarization, clearly discernible between the three competing factions. The Reds or "The Mountain" had around 200 deputies, the republicans approximately 100 and the monarchist Party of Order about 450. This in itself shows a clear shift in the correlation of forces from the centre to the right and/or from the progressive democratic bourgeoisie to the conservative monarchist bourgeoisie. The Left appeared to have gained in strength but this was merely a matter of appearances given that after continued political defeats its discourse had patently become more moderate, particularly after the violent departure from the scene of the more radical representatives.

<sup>4</sup> For Cowling-Martin the social alliance that elevated Bonaparte to the presidency was comprised of the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the grande bourgeoisie, who voted for the restoration of the monarchy (Cowling-Martin 2002, 3).

### **From May 28, 1849 to December 2, 1851**

On May 28, 1849, the Legislative Assembly was convened and on December 2, 1851, violently dissolved. Following Marx's relevant outline, we can distinguish the following periods:

From May 29 to June 13, 1849, dominated by the struggle between the democracy and the bourgeoisie and ending with the defeat of the petty-bourgeois or democratic party.

From June 13, 1849 to May 31, 1850, dominated by the parliamentary dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, that is to say the coalition of Orleanists and Legitimists also known as the Party of Order, a dictatorship supplemented by the abolition of universal suffrage.

May 31, 1850 to December 2, 1851, a period of struggle between the parliamentary representation of the bourgeoisie, as expressed by the remaining party of the order and Bonaparte, the victory of the latter, followed by the collapse of constitutional/ parliamentary sovereignty.

As Marx observes, at this stage continuing to represent the bourgeoisie, the Party of Order stood against the accumulated dissatisfaction of the other classes without being able to contain this dissatisfaction through enlisting it into its own conflicts with the monarchy. The power of the

dominated classes was based on the right to vote so this is what the bourgeoisie were constrained to oppose. Correspondingly the petty-bourgeois who had seen their material interests being placed in jeopardy were drawn towards the workers (Marx 2003, 41-42). To this we add the thesis that all this conflict amplified the dislike of the great mass of the bourgeoisie for representative institutions, and the more so when they became aware of the emerging alliance between the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

A key element in the alliance between the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat were the by-elections of 10th March 1849 in Paris conducted to find new occupants for the seats left vacant as a result of political persecution of their predecessors. The upshot was that in Paris the three vacated seats were all won by the Social Democrat candidates, receiving 127,000 votes overall, and of the total of 21 seats the Social Democrats won 11. This was interpreted as consolidation of the

influence of the Left, despite the persecution that had preceded it in the most recent period (Agulhon 1983, 125) Unnerved, Bonaparte forged an alliance with the Party of Order and on May 31 a new electoral law was passed under the terms of which three million casual workers were no longer able to vote because three years' residence in the same area was now demanded, the lower age limit rose from 21 to 25 and voting was prohibited to the indigent. Freedom of the press was also being curbed through a range of other legislative innovations, and freedom of association abolished. At the same time the state acquired the right to ban unions and associations. This is a key point since the curtailment in relations of representation is largely achieved through the temporary alliance between Bonaparte and the Party of Order. The relationship between the two reflects primarily the autonomy of the political element over the economic, in the sense that the political is the Party of Order and the economic the great mass of the bourgeoisie that feels itself represented by Bonaparte.

It is the conditions of transition to a capitalist state embracing the whole of the bourgeoisie that creates space for the autonomy of the political element.

On 13th June the Party of Order succeeded in subordinating the Constitution to *majority decisions* of the National Assembly, as the legitimate protests of Left parliamentarians and thousands of citizens against the anti-Constitutional campaign in Rome were met with brutal repression.<sup>5</sup> From the moment that a given number of parliamentarians began to comply with the orders of the public prosecutors they were consenting to the abolition of parliamentary immunity itself. The powers of the President of the Republic were thereby upgraded and those of each separate parliamentary deputy correspondingly downgraded.

The role of the farmers proved to be particularly decisive because they were to ally themselves with Bonaparte against the Party of Order from the moment that parameters such as the low grain prices, the price

fluctuations for cotton, the poor harvest for raw silk and the increases in taxation left them with the feeling that they had been defrauded by the Party of Order. When these reactions were made manifest a wave of persecution of teachers (seen as being ringleaders of the farmers) was unleashed, obliging them to submit to the tutelage of the church. Community leaders were hounded and a network of spies was established in every region.

The autumn of 1850 was entertained by the spectacle of the rivalry between the Presidency and the parliamentary deputy and military commander Changarnier, culminating on January 3 with the dismissal of Changarnier. On January 18 a motion of no confidence in the government was tabled and passed with 415 votes in favour and 286 against, following an initiative by the Party of Order, which was protesting in this way against the dismissal of Changarnier that had been ordered by this particular government. This meant that the parliament was now losing its control over the supreme command of the armed forces.

But this gave Bonaparte the opportunity to appoint a new transitional government, none of whose members were in the parliament. At the same time, a considerable section of the Party of Order voted against the party line, engendering a volatility of alliances between the various parliamentary factions and also enhancing the power of the parliamentarians supporting the Presidency. The government continued in office until April.

The political crisis propelled the Party of Order into an alliance with the democrats and the petty bourgeoisie. Ostensibly this signified an open breach between the Executive and Legislature. But in reality it meant that the transformations in the state had progressed so far that the – very desirable, for the bourgeoisie – possibility of abolishing the representative institutions had become visible.

According to Marx:

The one, the small republican faction of the bourgeoisie that alone could proclaim the republic, wrest it from the revolutionary proletariat by street fighting and a reign of terror, and draft its ideal basic features in the constitution; and the other, the whole royalist mass of the bourgeoisie that alone could rule in this constituted bourgeois republic, strip the constitution of its ideological trimmings, and realize by its legisla-

5 From the beginning of life of the new National Assembly, the Mountain was opposed to France's participation in the Rome campaign, which was, however, supported by Bonaparte and the majority of the National Assembly. The victorious outcome for the French troops gave a further boost to the morale of the bourgeoisie's political representatives, whereas the June 13 protests by 30,000 representatives of the Mountain were met with repression by the forces of Changarnier, incidents in Lyon being much more violent, with 150 dead and 1,500 arrested.



tion and administration the indispensable conditions for the subjugation of the proletariat. [Marx 2010, 39]

This position is correct, the only caveat being that the democratic sector of the bourgeoisie was a remnant from the previous period, whereas the so-called monarchic bourgeoisie comprised the majority of the bourgeois class that were determinedly resisting against to the relations of representation

In any case, the result was that Bonaparte managed on April 11, 1851 to bring back the government of January 18, something that can be seen not only as a victory for Bonaparte over the Party of Order but also a victory of the hardy mechanism of the bourgeois state over relations of representation<sup>6</sup> in conjunction with participation of aristocracy of finance in the government through Fould.<sup>7</sup> The period between April 11 and October 9, 1851 is therefore regarded as catalytic for the breach between the mass constituency for bourgeois order and the parliamentary representation.

Marx attributes the above-mentioned behaviour to the pressures being exerted on active agents of capitalist activity on account of a minor economic crisis: falling exports and continued industrial stagnation. This brought economic protagonists into conflict with their political representatives. For our part, we think that it is something deeper transcending the framework of temporary economic recession, related to the very functioning of the capitalist state which is not to be equated with the existence of representative institutions.

As for the military aspect, the Bonaparte government ordered the dissolution of the Mobile Guard from the moment that the demands of its democratic component began to intensify, but also from the moment that the government felt itself in a position to do this. Half the soldiers in the Mobile Guard were dismissed and the other half were integrated into the army on clearly lower pay. In this way yet another danger was neutralized.

6 "In November, 1849, Bonaparte had satisfied himself with an UNPARLIAMENTARY, in January, 1851, with an OUTSIDE PARLIAMENTARY, on April 11, he felt strong enough to form an ANTI-PARLIAMENTARY Ministry, that harmoniously combined within itself the votes of lack of confidence of both assemblies – the constitutive and the legislative, the republican and the royalist" (Marx 2003, 79- 80).

7 "Fould not only represented Bonaparte's interests at the Bourse, he represented also the interests of the Bourse with Bonaparte" (Marx 2003, 87- 88).

On the institutional plane, the President wanted a revision of the Constitution to enable him to stand again for a new term in office. But to achieve this he needed the support of three quarters of the Parliament, which was not feasible: in late July 1851 the weakened Party of Order, together with pro-Bonaparte parliamentary deputies attempting to placate the President and forestall the likelihood of a coup, voted in favour of the revision: 448 voting for and 278 against (mainly those belonging to the republican Left).

But this development was not enough to check the trend towards the abolition of democracy. The final act of the drama came between October 9 and December 2, when an open rift emerged between the parliament and the executive, with Bonaparte declaring, contrary to the National Assembly, that there should be a reinstatement of universal suffrage. The conflict ended with the dissolution of the Parliament by Bonaparte and the declaration of martial law. The anti-Bonapartist reaction was suppressed in the following days, with 500 hundred dead and 150,000 arrested, of whom 10,000 were sent into exile. Bonaparte's actions were ratified by the referendum December 21 and 22, 1851, where 7,400,000 of the ten million registered voters gave their consent, with only 600,000 voting against.<sup>8</sup>

Marx's final conclusion is that Bonapartism should be interpreted, up to moment that "when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation" (Marx 2000, 34) and elsewhere:

In contrast with the Legislative, the Executive power expresses the heteronomy of the nation in contrast with its autonomy. Accordingly, France seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only in order to fall under the despotism of an individual, under the authority, at that, of an individual without authority. The struggle seems to settle down to the point where all classes drop down on their knees, equally impotent and equally dumb. [Marx 2003, 103]

8 For Cowling-Martin, the social alliance on which Bonaparte depended to consolidate his one-man rule was comprised of finance capital, the landowning aristocracy who were loyal to the Bourbons, the industrial faction of the bourgeoisie, the lumpenproletariat, the army and state officials (Cowling-Martin 2002, 4).

Engels, too, is particularly clear when in a letter to Marx there is also the remark that:

It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the bourgeoisie does not possess the qualities required to rule directly itself, and that therefore, unless there is an oligarchy as here in England capable of taking over, for good pay, the management of state and society in the interest of the bourgeoisie, a Bonapartist semi-dictatorship is the normal form; it promotes the great material interests of the bourgeoisie even against the bourgeoisie, but allows it no share in the government itself. Conversely, this dictatorship itself is in turn compelled unwillingly to adopt these material interests of the bourgeoisie. [Marx and Engels 2010, 266]

Lenin in his *State and Revolution* accepts Engels' thesis, outlined in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 1988, 231) that

exceptional periods, however, occur when the warring classes are so equal in forces that the state power, as apparent mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence in relation to both. This applies to the absolute monarchy of the 17th and 18th centuries which balanced the nobility and the bourgeoisie against one another, and to the Bonapartism of the first and particularly of the second French empire, which played off the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. [Lenin 1977, 16]

Gramsci, for his part, approaches Bonapartism as a specific form of Caesarism integrated into the framework of the capitalist state. Caesarism for Gramsci is not just a momentary balance between capitalist forces but a devastating equilibrium that produces policy and cannot, at its extreme, end in any way other than mutual ruin (Gramsci 1999, 463).

### Poulantzas' Position

Poulantzas, by contrast with the classic view, would argue that "to explain the relative autonomy of the Bonapartist state (considered as the 'religion of the bourgeoisie') as a constituent characteristic of the state, by reference to a situation of equilibrium between the social forces in struggle, is *totally insufficient*" (Poulantzas 1987, 260). For Poulantzas the working

class in Louis Bonaparte's France could in no way be regarded as an alternative pole to the bourgeoisie, given that it had been crushed politically. What existed on the eve of the coup was the conflict between the bourgeoisie on one hand and the petty bourgeoisie and farmers on the other, without there being any equilibrium (Poulantzas 1987, 260). As for the autonomy of the bureaucracy, this is indeed a reality within the parameters of service to the political power of the ruling classes and representation of their class interests (Poulantzas 1987, 354).

Poulantzas' view is that the capitalist state:

takes charge, as it were, of the bourgeoisie's political interests and realizes the function of political hegemony which the bourgeoisie is unable to achieve. *But in order to do this, the capitalist state assumes a relative autonomy with regard to the bourgeoisie.* This is why Marx's analyses of Bonapartism as a capitalist type of state are so significant. For this relative autonomy allows the state to intervene not only in order to arrange compromises vis-à-vis the dominated classes, which in the long turn, are useful for the actual economic interests of the dominant classes or fractions, but also (depending on the concrete conjuncture) to intervene against the long term interests of one or other fraction of the dominant class: for such compromises and sacrifices are sometimes necessary for the realization of their political class interests. [Poulantzas 1987, 284- 285]

So essentially, for Poulantzas, Marx in the 18th Brumaire is referring to the capitalist state's structural tendency to acquire relative autonomy so as better to organize the vested interests of the ruling class. What is exceptional are the circumstances under which the autonomy is actuated and not the autonomy itself (Jessop 2002, 179).

### The Political Element and the State as Catalysts for the Understanding of the 18th Brumaire.

What becomes evident from this juxtaposition of the views of the classic authors is that the Bonapartist state embodies a catastrophic contraposition of two social blocs within which Bonaparte finds the opportunity to commandeer them constructing his own independent framework of power.

Marx presents this as the result of continuing conflict between classes and factions of classes, where at the end of each phase the loser would withdraw from the political scene, only to make a renewed comeback, but weaker, whereas the temporary winner would not perceive that the only result of all this was a further strengthening of Bonaparte. Marx abhorred Bonaparte, whom he saw as a figure from the underworld, while at the same time ridiculing them for the humiliations they suffered the social classes who sought to ally themselves with him.

Without resorting to such derogatory characterizations, the other classic authors (Engels, Lenin, Gramsci) concluded that at some point there must be an equilibrium of forces between the two social blocs and that then a personage or a political collectivity will come from outside and impose a kind of suzerainty over the representatives of political authority.

But the question remains: In this case is the state not capitalist and does not every species of Bonaparte embody bourgeois interests? Poulantzas for his part considers what the classics mean is that in times of crisis the state acquires autonomy in order to function in the collective interest of the ruling class. However, as Poulantzas himself has shown, the relative autonomy of the capitalist state is inherent in nature and an *invariable reality*. Having said that, the fact is that in emergency situations, such as for example in the interwar period in a number of European national formations, there was an upsurge of fascism. In these instances the crisis state is neither a referee in a situation of deadlock nor a neutral political entity presiding over two social blocs that are bent on exterminating each other. *It is a specific form of capitalist state* associated with specific developments in the class struggle. It is accordingly not only through Bonapartism that the State intervenes against the transient interests of this or that section of the bourgeoisie and in favour of the long-term bourgeois interest. It is something inherent in the functioning of the bourgeois state.

May we conclude that Bonapartism is a form of emergency rule? To answer this question persuasively one would need to highlight the overall content of the concept and the specific historical conditions prevailing in France in 1851.

The story begins when the proletariat takes the initiative of staging an uprising that results in the emergence of a democratic state, grounded in universal suffrage in which all social classes are represented in the decisive political institutions. The proletariat harboured the illusion that enlargement of the electorate and popular mobilization would be sufficient for moving forward in a transition to socialism. But without social alliances, without political organization, without a political program, none of this was possible when faced with an opponent that was preparing from day one to neutralize the proletariat. The bourgeoisie, by contrast, on the one hand forged social alliances, isolating the proletariat, and on the other constructed a materiality of state (military fortifications, normalization of the functions of parliament so as to preclude any overruling 'from the street', activation of ideological apparatuses for the enforcement of 'order') whose functioning led to the defeat of the proletariat.

Of great interest is the sequel, when the democratic faction of the bourgeoisie came into conflict with the Party of Order which, however, rallied the great mass of the bourgeoisie. What was created in consequence was a political schism within the bourgeoisie, but not a social schism. The bourgeoisie did not judge that it was represented only by the Party of Order. And because the bourgeois democrats, the petty bourgeoisie and even the socialists continued to be a presence in the representative institutions, the Party of Order was obliged to enter into alliance with Bonaparte and the executive. On the other hand, Bonaparte was elected President, supported by a broad alliance of social and political forces opposed to the policies of the moderate bourgeoisie.

What is the meaning of all this, up to this point? Firstly that the proletariat was not ready, for the reasons indicated, to assert its authority and the petty bourgeoisie and the farmers by their nature could not. Moreover the parameter of universal suffrage complicated matters still further because it made it possible for resentment to be transformed into political instability. The issue of maintaining order made a comeback, increasingly, into political discourse, particularly after the June 1849 joint insurrection of proletariat and petty bourgeoisie against the Expedition to Rome, but if one examines what had brought about the absence of order one will

be led back to the February revolution and its aftermath (the June revolution, the parliamentary disputes, the clash between a large proportion of the provisional parliament and the executive).

From this point onwards the Party of Order began to suffer from serious conflict between different social factions and categories with the result that it lost the capacity to unite politically. This relieved Bonaparte from the pressure to accommodate an ally, allowing him greater freedom to display his policy, with which a section of the Party of Order was in any case in agreement. It was a development that was to be cut short by the electoral success of the alliance between the petty-bourgeoisie and the working class, reflected in their mass entry into parliament. Here too – and this demonstrates the central importance of universal suffrage – there would be two consequences: on the one hand the moderation of intra-bourgeois disagreements, thus bringing the grievously divided Party of Order under the hegemony of Bonaparte, and on the other the unease of Bonaparte at the electorate's shift to the left, which would induce him to seek, and secure, an agreement for limitation of the suffrage.

The whole history of collaboration between the Party of Order and Bonaparte is one of intensification of state authoritarianism, which had in fact already begun from the time of the bourgeois democrats: restrictions on press freedom, abolition of universal suffrage, heightened repression, reduction in the role of parliament. But when one reaches this point the question that arises is: what was the point of the Second Republic, given that those who wanted it had sustained serious defeats and those who ran the administration didn't want it.

Does all this signify a process of delinking of the political from the economic? This depends on what we mean. If we mean the relative autonomy of the state from the individual interests of various factions of the bourgeoisie, this is something inherent in the materiality of the bourgeois state. If, however, we are referring to the endeavour of the great mass of the bourgeoisie, to use the exact expression of Marx, to free itself from the restrictions imposed by bourgeois democracy, then we are coming closer to the truth. The February Revolution gave the bourgeoisie in toto access to political power, on the precondition, however, of its

granting numerous concessions to its allies. Gradually with the development of the class struggle (a process in which the manoeuvres of Bonaparte are also to be included) it succeeded in disencumbering itself of its allies, and in consequence was also able to revoke the institutional compromises it had already made, in other words, to be rid of France's Second Republic. It was of little significance to the great mass of the bourgeois class whether this liquidation should be the accomplishment of a political party or an individual personage. Essentially the bourgeoisie had broken its ties with its parliamentary representatives, precisely because it had broken its ties with parliamentarianism as such.

This is a critical point. Contrary to a fairly widespread belief that capitalism and parliamentary democracy go together, in fact the institutions of mass political representation were imposed on the dominant classes through the struggles of the dominated classes. Nowadays the disjuncture between relations of representation and capitalism is becoming ever more obvious: what is involved is an inexorable erosion of the powers of the powers of representative institutions and, in consequence, the shift of power to centres impermeable to popular control (from committees of technocrats in the various ministries to the all-powerful – for the countries in the Eurozone – European Central Bank). In the specific case of the France of the Second Republic it was the need for the transformation of political power into the power of the bourgeoisie as a whole that opened the way for the imposition of mass representative institutions. But as is shown by the historical evolution itself, nothing can be assumed to remain unchanged. When the intensity of popular reactions diminishes, the bourgeoisie prefers to be represented directly by the state mechanisms and not by the representative institutions that are characterized by the materiality of the presence of the dominated classes. To put it somewhat differently, political representation of the bourgeoisie as a whole has already been achieved through the State. The bourgeoisie is politically represented first and foremost through parliamentary institutions only to the extent that this emerges out of pressures from the reactions of subordinate classes.

As for the question of whether Bonapartism is to be categorized as a form of national emergency state, or

in other words a marginal variety of authoritarian state whose further oscillations will result in breakage and transformation into a dictatorship, we have two basic objections to this. The first is historical in character in the sense that in the 19th century the bipolar schema of parliamentary versus anti-parliamentary regime is not present, precisely because parliamentary democracy is not the rule, at least in the contemporary sense, in most national formations. The second is methodological and rejects the bipolar model one extreme of which is the healthy parliamentary democracy and the other the national emergency state. On the contrary we believe that there are no impermeable dividing walls between these different forms of state because in reality they are the results of class struggle, or more properly opposing trends within the tendency of the capitalist system not to have its dynamic restricted by institutions of popular representation.

From this viewpoint, while the position of Thalheimer (Thalheimer 1930), according to which Bonapartism and Fascism comprise twin alternatives to the prospect of proletarian power, has the right orientation to these phenomena in so far as it approaches them in terms of class rather than personal strategies, it is nevertheless limited when it conceptualizes them simply as an “exceptional” state of the socialist revolution and does not perceive them to be an abiding tendency of the bourgeoisie to limit the civil rights not only of the proletariat but of all the subaltern classes. The bourgeoisie does not trade away its political power for the sake of socio-economic power,<sup>9</sup> because its fundamental interest, which is the reproduction of relations of exploitation and domination, is evidently served more effectively by the abolition or restriction of relations of representation.

To conclude, Bonapartism is a form of state which, although the class struggle waged in the context of early forms of capitalist domination played a significant role in its formation, in fact highlights the basic characteristic of the capitalist state: the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie which, in the absence of the deterrent effect of popular mobilizations, tends to eliminate the institutions of popular representation.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the class struggle in the French social formation between 1848 and 1851 focusing on the role and the content of Bonapartism. In the interpretation of the classics he is seen as an element of external domination over the balance of antagonistic class forces, a view that harbours the danger of approaching the state as neutral in its dynamic owing to the mutual extermination of two opposing social forces, a State which then comes to utilize a personage for *its own* benefit. But neither is the Poulantzas approach convincing when it attempts to propose an “authentically” Marxist variant of the notion of an autonomous relationship between the state and bourgeois interests.

Precisely because by virtue of its very creation the capitalist state has the function of defending the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie, there is no “special moment” when it ceases to operate in such a capacity, either in conditions of parliamentary democracy or in those of a dictatorship. Neither can some external factor enter the equation and in instrumentalist fashion alter its fundamental functioning. Nor, last but not least, is there a “normal” mode of operation of the capitalist state oscillating between a democratic parliamentary regime and the state-of-emergency break-up that will usher in a dictatorial capitalist regime.

The thesis that we have defended is that Bonapartism can be like a snapshot of the way the bourgeois state operates. To be worthy of its name the bourgeois state should work for the benefit of all factions of the bourgeoisie and from that point onward it depends on the evolution of the social balance of forces how democratic/representative it will be. The French example shows that the element of representation is not at all given in the capitalist system. It is established only when there are forces that can impose it. Unlike the representative system, which may or may not exist, the state never ceases to embody the state power of the bourgeoisie.

The above enables us to detect the red thread connecting the Bonapartist state with the transformations of the modern state.

We find that in the last decades there has been continuous deterioration of the representative institutions as a result of a number of processes: the elimination of essential differences between the ruling parties,

<sup>9</sup> As argued by Reid (Reid 2007, 552).

the rapid transference of political decisions from the legislature to the executive, and from there to the administration, and on the other hand transference to the head of the government, that is to say to the Prime Minister and the technocrats advising him and/or in transnational organizations such as the EU and the IMF, limitations on the relative autonomy of the state vis à vis the bourgeoisie, and expansion of the activity of repressive mechanisms.

These are developments that show yet again how relations of parliamentary representation are not a structural element of the capitalist mode of production but rather a result of class struggle. What can be gained from the struggles of the popular strata can also be lost. Exactly as happened in the period between 1848 and 1851.

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