Dahrendorf gave a common view dramatic form when he wrote, ‘Marx postponed the systematic presentation of his theory of class until death took the pen from his hand. The irony has often been noted that the last (52nd) chapter of the last (third) volume of Capital, which bears the title “The Classes”, has remained unfinished. After a little more than one page the text ends with the lapidary remark of its editor, Engels: “Here the manuscript breaks off”’. Unfortunately, the colourful picture this suggests, of the pen dropping from the hand of the dying Marx as he was on the point of completing his masterwork, isn’t ours to keep: the draft containing this chapter was completed, as is fairly well known, before Marx turned to the preparation of Volume I for publication. Nevertheless, some have taken Marx’s delay in returning to the chapter – until it was too late – as an admission in actu of failure, attesting to a basic flaw in his theory. Engels’s explanation is less dramatic: Marx liked to leave conclusions ‘for the final editing, shortly before printing, when the latest historical events would supply him, with unfailing regularity, with illustrations of his theoretical arguments, as topical as anyone could desire’. Reopening the question of the relation of Marx’s final page and a half to the rest of Capital, I wish to explore what Marx’s willingness to leave the matter in so sketchy a state might indicate about the nature, or even the existence, of a Marxian theory of class.

The matter is of importance, since Marx’s critique of political economy stands from the start under the sign of class. The preface to Zur Kritik, the publication that began the examination of ‘the system of bourgeois economy’, promises an analysis of ‘the economic conditions of existence of the three great

1 Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Modern Society (1959), p. 3.
2 Ibid., p. 8.
3 Marx, Capital III, p. 97.
classes into which modern bourgeois society is divided. This was to be carried out in the first three of the six books which Marx proposed to write, those on capital, landed property, and wage labour. In this plan Marx echoed Ricardo's identification of 'the principle problem in Political Economy' as to 'determine the laws which regulate' the distribution of 'the produce of the earth' among 'three classes of the community', the proprietors of land, the owners of the capital employed in cultivating it and the labourers who work it. The nature of Marx's critique of political economy may be indicated elliptically by pointing to the replacement of 'distribution' by 'conditions of existence' as analytical focal point. The former conceptualisation takes the existence of the 'three great classes' for granted as a feature of society, asking only how the social product is shared out between them. Marx, in contrast, is interested in the historically specific conditions under which society can be characterised in terms of these three groupings: both the mechanism of their historical production and (as discussed in the previous chapter) that of their continuous reproduction. Marx's early studies of the dismal science reflected his discovery of the centrality of economic categories to the ideological terms in which bourgeois society represents itself. His serious reengagement with economic theory after the 1848 revolutions was more directly provoked by his perception of a relation between the rise and fall of radical mass movements on the Continent and the (inverse) movements of the economy. In the 'Review' of events he wrote with Engels, from exile in London, for the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, Marx discussed in detail the correlation of crisis and revolt, arguing that the prosperity sure to return to Germany and France in response to renewed expansion in England would rule out any rapid revival of the movement.

With this general prosperity, in which the productive forces of bourgeois society develop as luxuriantly as is at all possible within bourgeois relationships, there can be no talk of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible in the periods when both these factors, the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production, come in collision with each other ... A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis.

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4 Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [1859], in *MECW* 29, p. 261.
6 Marx and Engels, 'Review: May to October' [1850], in *MECW* 10, p. 510.