As far as the question of barbarism and civilization goes, the difference between political left and right is fairly easy to identify. For the right, the relation between the two is sequential, while for the left the two conditions are synchronous. In the conservative view, there was first barbarism and then civilization, as the latter was dredged from the murky depths of the former with immense labour and self-sacrifice. Civilization, however, is a precarious, unstable achievement, always sickeningly capable of sliding back into barbarism again, not least because certain unregenerate elements persist within it: the bestial working classes, women, anarchists, football crowds, Mel Gibson and the like. Even so, the distinction between the two states is relatively clear. This is not so for the political left, for whom a certain barbarism is the obscene underside of civility. For every splendid cathedral, a pit of bones. For every magnificent novel or symphony, wretched, back-breaking, anonymous labour. Behind every man a long-suffering woman. (Speaking of which, when the philosopher Fichte remarked that he was busy contemplating the philosophical concept of absolute egoism, someone commented that they would like to know what Mrs Fichte thought of that . . .)

For the right, barbarism transcends civilization, whereas for the left it is the very condition of it. One of the great benefits of Marxism, apart from the pleasure of annoying people you do not like and looking forward to a society where you do not have to do any work, is Marx’s own impeccable even-handedness on this question. For him, modern civilization was an enthralling narrative of progress, emancipation, liberalism, civil rights, feminism, democracy and untold material affluence. It was also one long nightmare from which he was seeking to awaken the world. (Or as a
character in a Saul Bellow’s novel remarks, “History is a nightmare during which I am trying to get some sleep.”) Marx did not of course mean, in some feeble liberal attempt at equipoise, that some of history was progressive and some was oppressive. He was in search of the underlying mechanisms by which the one was, inescapably, the flipside of the other. Civilization and barbarism together, then, so inextricably interwoven that they appear seamless. In class-society, no freedom without exploitation, no flourishing for some without wretchedness for others. In the midst of the most fabulous affluence history has ever known, Greek men and women as I speak are rummaging in rubbish bins to find food for their children.

Which is why, I suppose, Marx refused to dignify everything that has happened in the human narrative so far with the title of history. For him, it was all pre-history. The only truly historic event would be to get history itself off the ground, in all its prodigal difference, plurality and diversity. And about what this would look like, Marx has notoriously little to say. He is a prophet, not a clairvoyant. The Biblical prophets were not those who peered into the future, but those who warned the Jewish people that unless they sought for justice, there was not going to be a future. Or at least, it would be thoroughly unpleasant. The only image of the future is the failure of the present. One cannot pre-draft and pre-programme human freedom. Once men and women take their collective self-determination into their own hands, there is no predicting what they will get up to, and Marxism itself can wither away. The only good reason for being a radical is to get yourself to the point where you can stop being one and talk about something more interesting for a change, like the wonderfully complex syntax of Marcel Proust or the extraordinary site of Prince Charles’s ears. If there are feminists around in twenty years time, it will be a great pity.

In Marx’s view, you cannot really have socialism without first having had capitalism. Or at least, without someone having had it, who might then fly to your aid. Marx is by no means simply opposed to capitalism, as some people are opposed to salt and smoking. On the contrary, there are few greater hymns of praise to this most revolutionary of modes of production than The Communist Manifesto. Socialism for Marx is possible only on the basis of the prodigious spiritual and material riches accumulated by capitalism. Otherwise you will almost certainly end up with Stalinism. In a sense, then, socialism for Marx is dependent on centuries of barbarism, and this is a tragic scenario. At the end of many a tragedy, some new, frail, tentative shoots of life struggle valiantly to the surface; but it is always possible to ask whether the price paid in blood and suffering has been worth it.

This is certainly a question we can put to Marx, not least because he does not seem to have put it to himself. Even if the human species were to win through some kind of universal justice, even if we were to succeed in wiping Simon Cowell and Sarah Palin from human memory, could this really retrospectively justify the millennia of fruitless toil, blighted lives which went into its making? Could anything do so? As