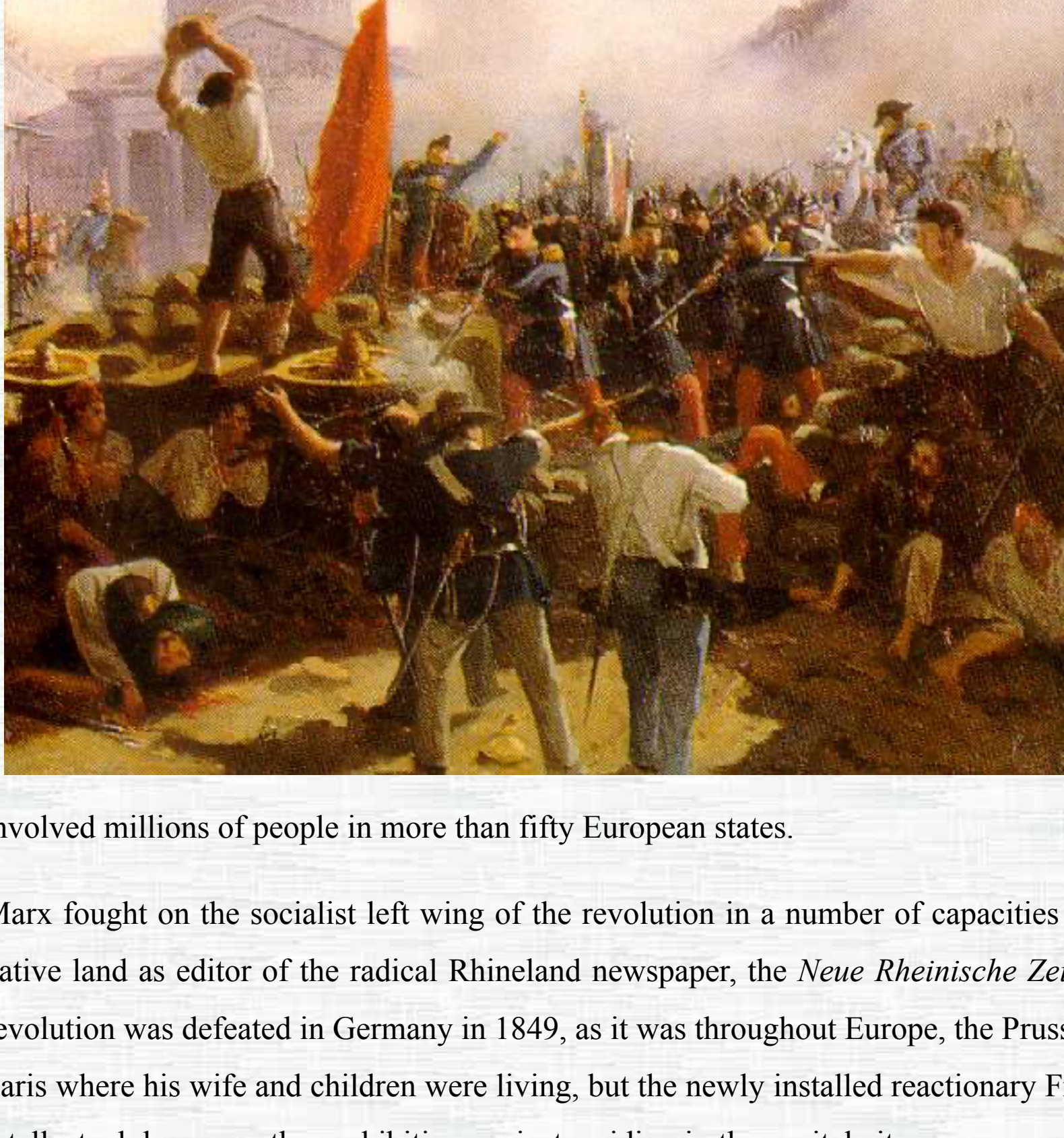


## Chapter Five

### At the British Museum

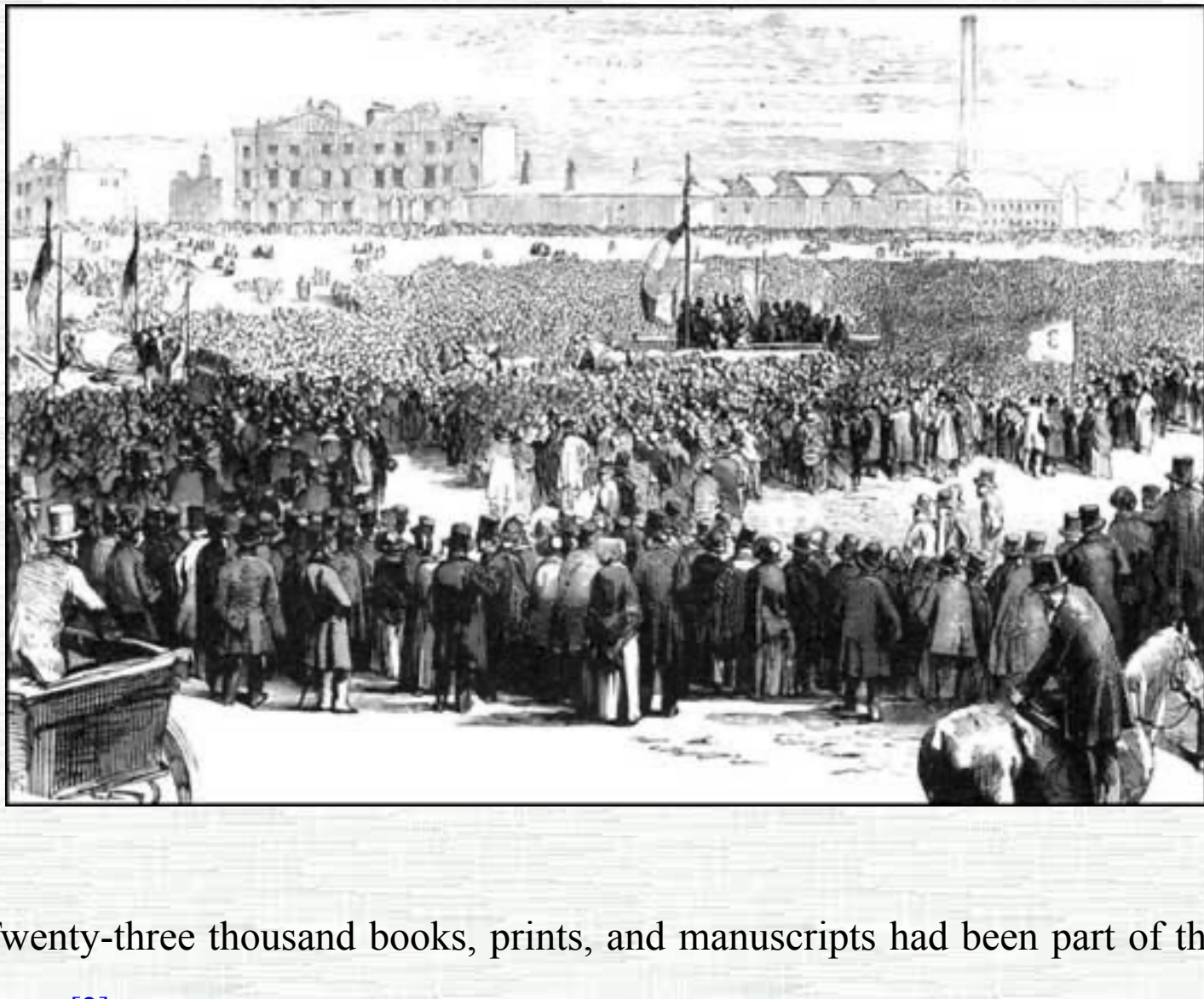
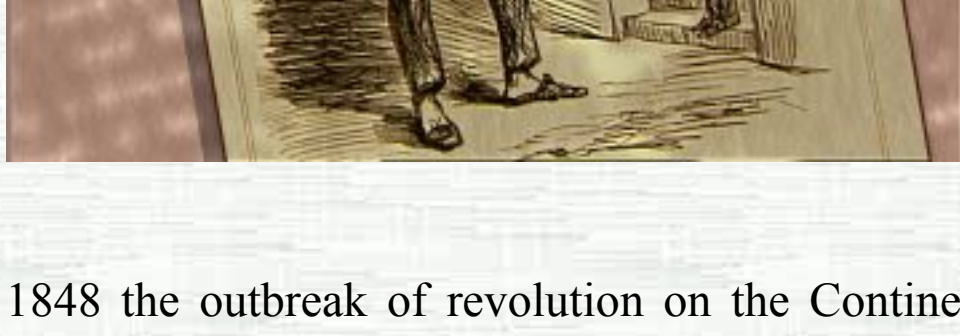
In June of 1850 Karl Marx obtained a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum. He had arrived in London the previous year as a political exile, a refugee from a revolution that failed but that shook the world nonetheless.



involved millions of people in more than fifty European states.

Marx fought on the socialist left wing of the revolution in a number of capacities and in more than one country, but nowhere more brilliantly than in his native land as editor of the radical Rhineland newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the "organ of democracy," as its masthead proclaimed. When the revolution was defeated in Germany in 1849, as it was throughout Europe, the Prussian government expelled Marx as a stateless person. He initially went to Paris where his wife and children were living, but the newly installed reactionary French government soon ordered him to relocate to Brittany. For a radical intellectual, however, the prohibition against residing in the capital city was as good as a demand to leave France. This is how it came about that in August of 1849 Marx fled with his family to England and showed up a year later at the British Museum.

Unbeknownst to Marx, the Museum had played a small and rather comic role in the tumultuous events of 1848. It is true that there had been no revolution in England, but for approximately a decade, the laboring poor had conducted a militant campaign for political reform under the auspices of the Chartist movement. By means of demonstrations, marches, petitions, and threats of a general strike, the Chartists agitated for such fundamental democratic measures as universal male suffrage, abolition of the property qualification for a seat in Parliament, and vote by secret ballot. Though the Chartists sought political rather than social reforms, they did not hesitate to condemn economic inequality in their speeches and pamphlets. Prominent members of the English bourgeoisie regarded them as a serious threat to the established order, believing that once workers held the right to vote, demands for the redistribution of wealth and common ownership of productive resources would soon follow. In 1848 the outbreak of revolution on the Continent accentuated the perception of a Chartist menace to the sanctity of private property. This was so much the case that the Trustees of the British Museum proved themselves incapable of distinguishing between the threat of social appropriation of productive resources and that of outright looting. The Chartists announced that they would hold a massive demonstration on April 10 at Kensington Common, and that the members of their Western Division would first gather in Russell Square, near the Museum. Sensing danger to the property in their care, the Trustees arranged to have it defended by force of arms. In the words of W.H. Boulton, a historian of the Museum: "The staff were sworn in as special constables, and with some soldiers and pensioners from Chelsea Hospital they assembled in the Museum to defend its treasures. Muskets, ammunition, and cutlasses were supplied and provisions laid in lest there should be a siege of the British Museum."<sup>[1]</sup> Of course, no siege occurred since the Chartists never had any intention of launching an assault in the first place. In addition to this comedy of overreaction, there is an irony here. While the Trustees took such extreme steps to protect their holdings from a nonexistent Chartist threat, they soon made their literary treasures freely available for Marx's revolutionary use by issuing him a ticket to their Reading Room.

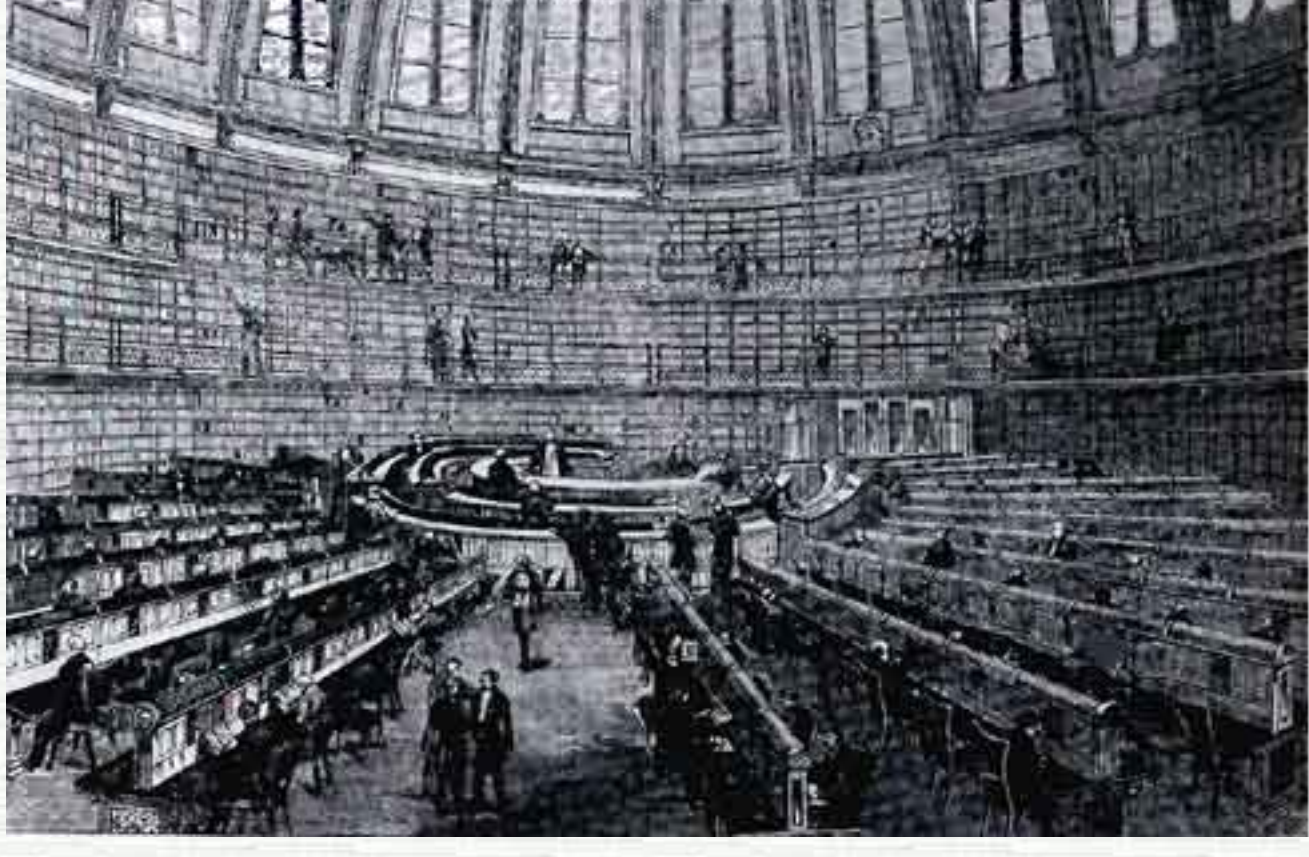
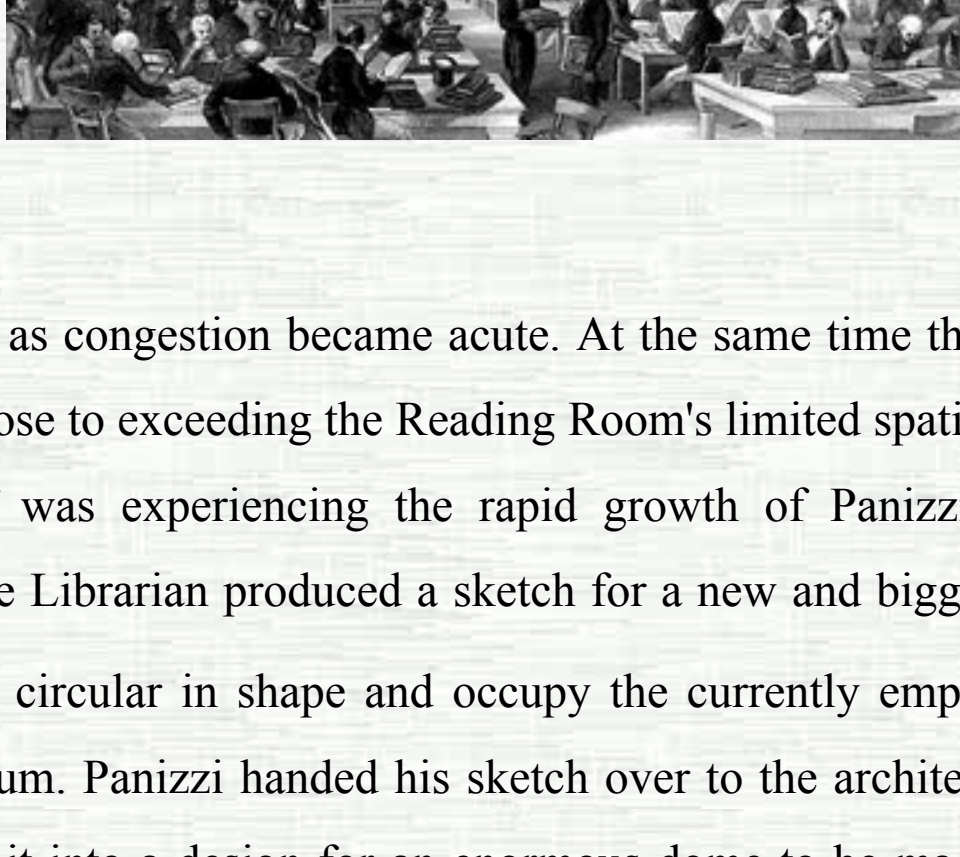


Twenty-three thousand books, prints, and manuscripts had been part of the original bequest from Sir Hans Sloane that established the British Museum in 1753.<sup>[2]</sup> By the time Marx obtained his ticket, the Museum's collection had grown to include four hundred thousand books alone and ranked sixth among the great libraries of the world.<sup>[3]</sup> And by the time he published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867, the library had swelled to fully one million volumes under the enthusiastic directorship of its Principal Librarian, the Italian expatriate, Sir Antonio Panizzi. Panizzi was also responsible for transforming a rather haphazard collection of materials into an exceedingly well-organized one through the development of a systematic catalogue.<sup>[4]</sup> The catalogued library was indispensable to Marx in his research in political economy. It was the surgical instrument that allowed him to probe the anatomy of capitalist society.

Marx began this effort in the summer of 1850 by reading back issues of the *Economist*. He was trying to answer the question that was of paramount concern at the time to the socialist movement and indeed the whole European left: why had the revolution of 1848 failed? He found his answer in the magazine's reports on price and currency fluctuations, investment trends, and recent technological developments. He had been able to revive the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* for a short period of time in the form of a quarterly journal. In articles in several of its issues Marx argued that a crisis of overproduction in the immediately antecedent period had prepared the way for the explosion of 1848. Even the new railroads were incapable of absorbing all of the available surplus capital. As a result, markets became saturated and production declined. By 1849, however, the crisis had run its course and global economic activity revived, especially with the discovery of gold in California. That is why the revolutionaries had been unable to consolidate their initial gains. It was clearly not possible to overthrow the dominant order while its guardians were celebrating the return of good times, a celebration that attained palpable form in British plans for the World Exposition of 1851, which Marx went so far as to call a new "Pantheon in the modern Rome."<sup>[5]</sup> "While this general prosperity lasts," he wrote in one of his articles, "there can be no question of any real revolution." In the same piece he went on to claim: "A new revolution is only possible as the result of a new crisis: but it will come just as surely as the crisis itself."<sup>[6]</sup>

While Marx was pouring through back issues of the *Economist* he was still living with his suitcase packed, like the vast majority of exiled revolutionaries. But as time wore on and economic stability deepened, he came to recognize that 1848 was not going to renew or repeat itself any time soon. Quickly wearying of the claustrophobic personality conflicts endemic to émigré politics, he withdrew into his work. In order to support himself, he began writing weekly articles as European correspondent for the American abolitionist newspaper, *The New York Daily Tribune*. More importantly, he revived an earlier plan for a book on political economy. Both activities led him to intensify his research at the Museum.

From the very beginning, the British Museum had an emotional significance for Marx in addition to an intellectual one: it offered him respite from misery. His earnings as a journalist were paltry, and supplementary stipends from Engels were too small to lift him out of poverty, at least until the last few years of his life. Hounded by creditors and landlords, he was a frequent visitor to pawnshops where he was sometimes forced to deposit even his coat and shoes. He lost three children to illness because of lack of money for proper medical care. Like his mythical hero Prometheus, who had also rebelled against the existing order, he had problems with his liver. As a result he was plagued with boils. Anxiety in combination with a congenital disorder prevented him from getting more than a few hours of sleep at night. For years he lived with the five other members of his family in two small rooms in a proletarian district in London. But his home was on Dean Street, no more than a ten minute walk from the Museum. When he was healthy enough and in possession of his shoes, he would arrive at ten in the morning and not leave for home until seven in the evening. The Museum was the place where he was able to get away from the squalor of daily existence, the sanctuary where he could forget his own suffering for awhile as he examined the causes of the prevailing social misery.



Still, a crisis point was reached as congestion became acute. At the same time that the users of the Library came close to exceeding the Reading Room's limited spatial resources, the collection itself was experiencing the rapid growth of Panizzi's tenure. So in 1852, the Principle Librarian produced a sketch for a new and bigger Reading Room.<sup>[8]</sup> It was to be circular in shape and occupy the currently empty central quadrangle of the Museum. Panizzi handed his sketch over to the architect Sir Robert Smirke who refined it into a design for an enormous dome to be made from the same materials used in the celebrated Crystal Palace: glass and cast iron. Smirke's version of the Reading Room opened for public use in 1857. It would have deserved to share the title that Marx had bestowed seven years earlier on the World Exposition — the "Pantheon in the modern Rome"— since the Pantheon was the only dome in the world that had a circumference that was larger, and only by three feet. Spacious, bright, and well-ventilated, the newly built chamber was able to accommodate four hundred and fifty eight persons at padded writing desks equipped with chairs of mahogany and leather. Marx conducted the bulk of his research for *Capital* in these comfortable surroundings.

The plan to develop a critique of political economy that would also serve as an

account of the underlying "laws of motion" of capitalism goes back, at least in

embryo, to 1844. Marx was in Paris at the time and intensively reading such celebrated economic theorists as Adam Smith, Sismondi, Say, and James Mill. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, he tried to show that the basically apologetic treatment of wages, profits, and ground rent given by the classical economists lent itself to an interpretation far more radical than the one they intended. For these economic categories attained their genuine significance only in terms of a deeper analysis of alienated labor, which was itself the secret behind the dehumanization of bourgeois society. The *Manuscripts* were preliminary studies never intended for publication: Marx wrote them in preparation for a book on economics. But he had to interrupt his plans for a published treatment as organizational demands intensified with the approach of 1848. With the defeat of the revolution and the enforced idleness of exile, he was able to resume his theoretical labors. As early as April of 1851, he announced that his project was nearing completion. In a letter to Engels he wrote: "I am so far advanced that in five weeks I will be through with the whole economic shit. And that done, I will work over my Economics at home and throw myself into another science at the Museum. I am beginning to be tired of it."<sup>[9]</sup> But the deeper Marx plunged into his investigations, the more voluminous the material he had to comprehend and the more difficult and confusing the task appeared to him. The "five weeks" grew into months and the months into years.

Marx never intended his "Economics" to be an exercise in detached scholarship. He was writing it in order to provide theoretical and even strategic orientation for the working-class movement. It is not surprising then that he accelerated his efforts with the outbreak of a new economic crisis in 1857, especially since he believed that revolution would not be far behind. He wrote Engels predicting imminent completion once again: "I am working madly through the nights on a synthesis of my economic studies so that, before the deluge, I shall at least have the outlines clear."<sup>[10]</sup> The deluge never came but Marx did manage to finish at least a rough version of the "Economics" under the title, *The Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* (the *Grundrisse*) later the same year. Although he found a publisher for the work, he decided that it was too disorganized to release in its existing form. Instead in 1859 he published its first chapter on money in a completely rewritten version as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. When the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow made the original manuscript widely available in the 1950s, the *Grundrisse* appeared to be an almost contemporary document because of its uncannily prescient analysis of automation. But it is equally important for understanding the full scope of Marx's theoretical project. It included a prospectus for a six part work consisting in treatments of 1) capital in general, 2) landed property, 3) wage labor, 4) the state, 5) foreign trade, and 6) the world market and crisis. As it turned out, Marx spent the rest of his life working on the first part only — capital in general — and even then was able to complete merely the first volume of a three volume treatise. The second and third volumes of *Capital* were edited by Engels on the basis of Marx's notebooks and released after the author's death.

In 1867 Marx succeeded in bringing part of his life's work to fruition at last by publishing *Capital*, volume one. The book begins with a discussion of commodities and money to which the concept of fetishism is central. If we want to understand the nature of a society based on commodity exchange, Marx tells us, we must

... take flight to the misty regions of the religious world. Here the products of the human brain appear as autonomous shapes endowed with a life of their own and enter into relations both with one another and with the human race. It is the same in the world of commodities with the products of the human hand. I call this the fetishism which attaches to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and therefore is inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>[11]</sup>

The insight that it is possible to adapt the critique of religion to that of the capitalist economy has a long history in Marx's thinking, a history we will explore in the following chapter. Even so the use of the word "fetishism" in this context does not occur until the passage quoted above. Is it an accident that Marx at the time was conducting his research at the British Museum?

We have no direct testimony from Marx or anyone else that the contents of the Museum (other than the library, of course) influenced the author of *Capital* in developing the theory of fetishism. But there is relatively strong circumstantial evidence that supports the possibility of such a connection.



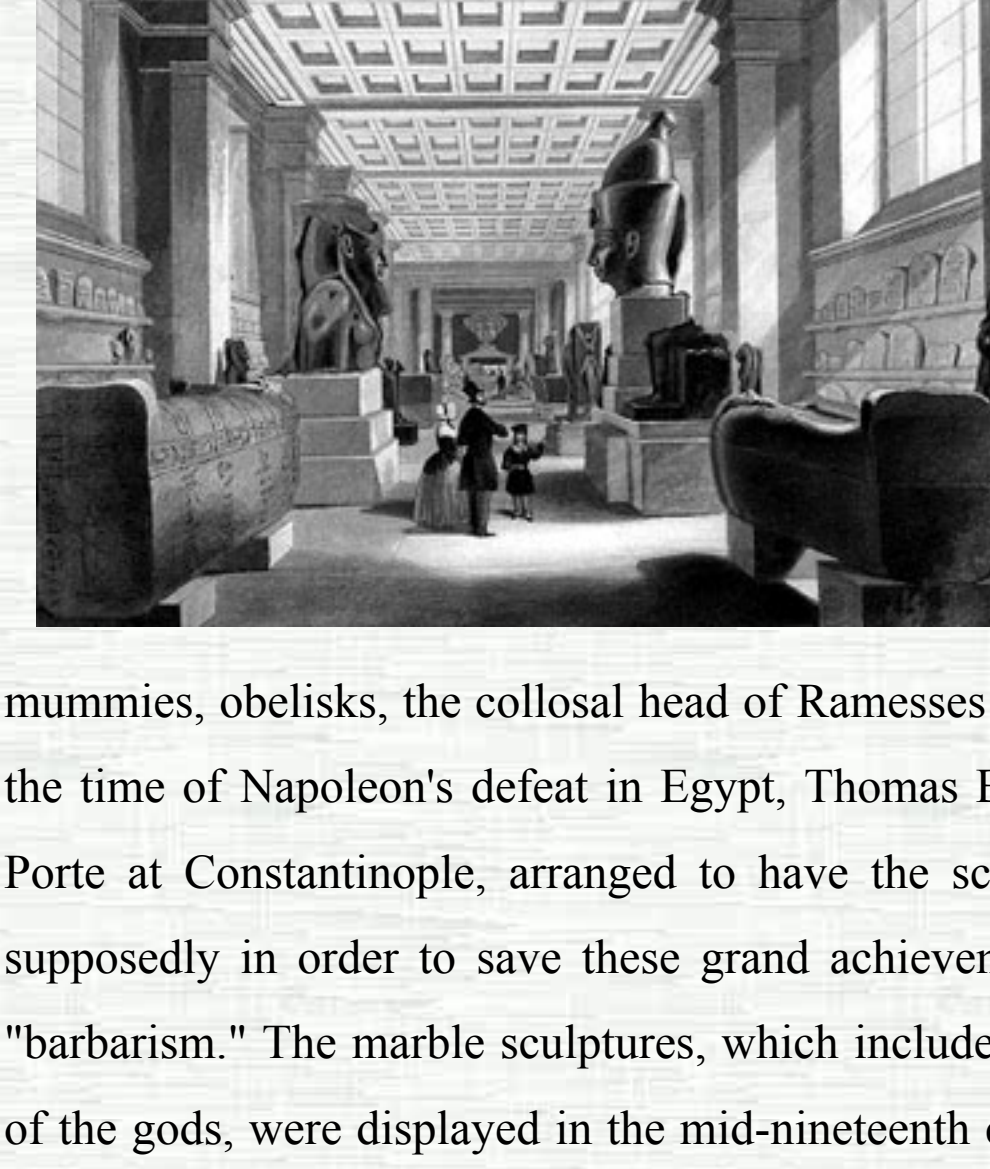
Ethnographic objects could be found in the Museum from the very beginning since some were part of the original Sloane bequest. But, of course, not all such objects were exhibited. The basement was crammed with donations from travelers to exotic parts of the world, and many of these gifts never succeeded in making their way to the exhibition areas. Still, in the early days of the Museum, at least one category of ethnographic items was prominently displayed. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Trustees created a South Sea Room that was very popular with visitors. It used twenty cases to exhibit the objects brought home by Banks and others from the three Cook expeditions. But they were not the only indigenous objects on display. Examples of the material culture of Africa and native America were located in a second room that also happened to include Egyptian mummies. In an effort to consolidate the ethnographic objects, the black African and native American items were transferred in 1808 to the South Sea Room, soon to be renamed the Ethnographical Room. For the next few decades, however, the collection fell into neglect because of the open disdain of Museum officials. Panizzi, for example, wished to be rid of the material entirely. "It does not seem right," he wrote, "that such valuable space should be taken up by Esquimaux dresses, canoes and hideous feather idols, broken flints and so on."<sup>[12]</sup> It was not until the collection was placed under the directorship of A. W.

Franks in 1860 that it found an energetic and effective champion.

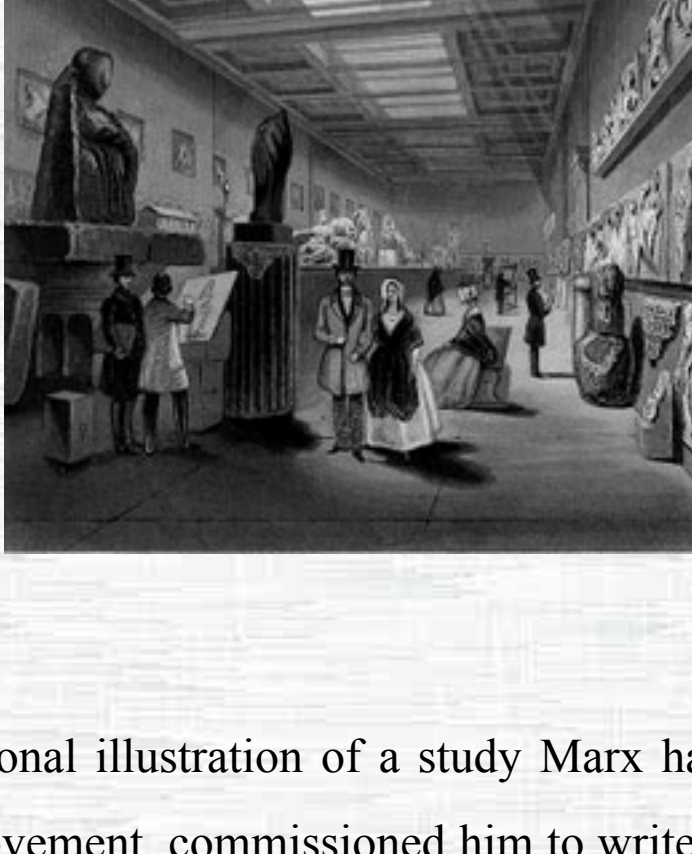
Since Marx often wandered through the Museum while taking

breaks from his work<sup>[13]</sup> it is likely that he would have seen

the ethnographic objects. Moreover, some of these would have had obvious religious significance, such as the Hawaiian feather gods Panizzi displayed, wooden masks from the American Northwest Coast, and jade *tiki* figures from New Zealand, all from Cook's voyages. True, the collection was still in a state of neglect when Marx arrived in 1850. According to *The British Museum, Historical and Descriptive* published that year: "The Ethnographical room [is] an oblong apartment of considerable size, though much too small for its purpose, which is the collection of articles illustrative of the manners and customs of nations lying at a distance from our own, as well as that of rude ancient



In Marx's mind — consciously or unconsciously — the ethnographic objects may also have formed a meaningful constellation with others better displayed, a constellation he had encountered once before. The British Museum had acquired the core of its Egyptian and Greek collections in the early years of the nineteenth century. Originally excavated by a team of archeologists that Napoleon had brought along on the Egyptian campaign, such important items as the Rosetta Stone and the Great Sarcophagus were captured by the British when they defeated the French armies in Egypt in 1802. By the mid-nineteenth century they were exhibited in the Egyptian Galleries of the British Museum along with



mummies, obelisks, the colossal head of Ramesses II, and the seated black granite statue of Amenophis III. Around the time of Napoleon's defeat in Egypt, Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin and ambassador to the Sublime Porte at Constantinople, arranged to have the sculptures of the Parthenon in Athens shipped back to England supposedly in order to save these grand achievements of Western civilization from the depredations of Turkish "barbarism." The marble sculptures, which included the Parthenon frieze as well as pediments illustrating the birth of the gods, were displayed in the mid-nineteenth century in the Elgin Room of the British Museum. The Egyptian Galleries and the Elgin Room were both wildly popular with visitors. Moreover, they were located close to the new Reading Room which was itself at the center of the Museum. Marx could not have missed them.

Collectively the indigenous objects, the Egyptian material, and the Greek sculptures were a kind of three dimensional illustration of a study Marx had undertaken more than twenty years earlier. In 1842, Bruno Bauer, his mentor and comrade in the Young Hegelian movement, commissioned him to write a critique of religious art. In the process Marx read and made excerpts from Charles de Brosses's treatise on the religious objects of Africa (with many references to native America) in relation to those of ancient Egypt. He also read and excerpted works on Greek art. It was the first time he had studied fetishism.

<sup>[1]</sup> W.H. Boulton, *The Romance of the British Museum* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., LTD., no date), 14.

<sup>[2]</sup> Marjorie Caygill, *Treasures of the British Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; 1985), 186.

<sup>[3]</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum* (London: Praeger Publishers; 1972), 159-161.

<sup>[4]</sup> Sir Frank Francis, *Treasures of the British Museum* (London: Thames and Hudson; 1971), 18-19.

<sup>[5]</sup> Quoted in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row; 1973), 242.

<sup>[6]</sup> Karl Marx, *Surveys From Exile: Political Writings: Volume 2*, David Fernbach, editor (London: Penguin Books; 1973), 131.

<sup>[7]</sup> Quoted in *The British Museum*,

<sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>[9]</sup> Quoted in McLellan, *Karl Marx*, 283.

<sup>[10]</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 290.

<sup>[11]</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, Erster Band* (MEGA, Band 8) (Berlin: Detz Verlag, 1989), 101.

<sup>[12]</sup> Panizzi quoted in Edward Miller, *That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum* (London: Andre Deutsch; 1973), 192.

<sup>[13]</sup> *Karl Marx: A Political Biography*.

<sup>[14]</sup> Quoted in Miller, 222.