



For over fifty years Marx and Engels collaborated and were absorbed in the study of Irish politics and the Irish question. Engels visited Ireland on three occasions, in 1856, 1867, and in 1870. He was collecting material for a *History of Ireland*, a project he never completed. In a letter to his daughter Jenny, Marx refers to Engels' 'book on Ireland – which by the by costs him a little more time than he had at first supposed – will be highly interesting'. The Paris Commune of 1871 diverted their attention from Ireland and the book was put aside to concentrate on the revolutionary upheavals in France. Unfortunately Engels never returned to the book and only the first four chapters were completed.

Marx's daughter, Eleanor, at the age of fourteen became passionate about the Irish question after visiting Manchester, where she had stayed with Friedrich Engels and his partner Lizzie Burns, who was active in the Irish emancipation movement. Eleanor immersed herself in the debates on Ireland, and for years she signed her letters 'Eleanor Marx (Fenian Sister)'. His other daughter Jenny was prominent in the campaign to save the lives of the 'Manchester Martyrs' during the Fenian campaign in 1870.

The Chartists and Ireland

By the early 1840s the Chartist movement in Britain had a substantial and growing working-class base. Both Marx and Engels believed that a social revolution was possible in both England and across Europe; and that the Chartist ranks 'swelled by two million brave and ardent Irish' would intensify the confrontation between the bourgeois and the proletariat and that an alliance between British and Irish radical elements would both advance British

Ireland: The Lever of Social Revolution

Paul O'Brien

democracy and lead to Irish independence. Marx saw Ireland as the 'weakest point' in the British Empire, and looked forward to a social revolution that would be 'Ireland's Revenge' upon England. Marx and Engels were of one mind in their view that Fenianism could be a revolutionary force in both Ireland and Britain. In a speech in 1848 commemorating the second anniversary of the Krakow Uprising in Poland, Marx drew a parallel between Poland and Ireland and the right to self-determination for all oppressed peoples:

'The Krakow revolution has set all of Europe a glorious example, because it identified the question of nationalism with democracy and with the liberation of the oppressed class... It finds its principles confirmed in Ireland, where O'Connell's party [the Irish Confederation, founded January 1847] with its narrowly restricted nationalistic aims has sunk into the grave, and the new national party is pledged above all to reform and democracy.'

In all of Marx's writing on Ireland, especially before 1870, the focus is on the revolutionary potential of the Fenians and radical movements in Ireland and their potential to mobilise the British working-class. Marx had no time for O'Connell or the Irish representatives in the British parliament. Writing about the 'Irish Brigade' as he called them, in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1854 he said:

'Since 1830 Downing Street has been placed at the mercy of the Irish Brigade... With all this power of Cabinet-making, the Brigade have never prevented any infamies against their own country nor any injustice to the English people. The period of their greatest power was at the time of O'Connell, from 1834-1841. To what account was it turned?... It is time for the Irish people to put off their dumb hatred of the English and call their own representatives to an account for their wrongs'.

Ireland's revenge

Very perceptively Marx had identified the social and economic impact that the famine had on Irish politics. The death of O'Connell and the devastation caused by the famine had changed the dynamics of Irish politics. The slogan of 'Repeal' no longer stirred the masses and since Catholic Emancipation (1829) religious grievances could no longer serve as a permanent propaganda theme. In the post-famine period the Irish agricultural system was replaced by the English system, the system of small land tenures by big tenures, and the modern capitalist was taking the place of the old landowner. Also Marx identified the rise of the Catholic Church as a powerful institution in Ireland and the developing relationship between the Irish Catholic Church and the British establishment. Commenting on this in a German newspaper in 1855 he writes:

'A protestant Tory newspaper bemoans the complete congruity existing between Lord Palmerston and the Irish clergy. When Palmerston hands over Ireland to the priests, the priests will elect Members of Parliament who will hand over England to Lord Palmerston.'

Marx went on to identify a number of important developments regarding politics in Ireland and Britain, especially following the failure of the 1848 rebellion in Ireland 'which finally destroyed Ireland's faith in herself', and therefore he believed that:

'Irish politicians were compelled to do what O'Connell had always avoided and refused to do, that is, to explore the real cause of the Irish malady and to make the relations of landed property and their reform the election slogan.'

Marx also identified the way that the British political scene had been transformed by mass immigration from Ireland subsequent to the famine:

"Ireland has revenged herself upon England, socially — by bestowing an Irish quarter on every English industrial, maritime or commercial town of any size, and politically — by furnishing the English Parliament with an 'Irish Brigade'... [who] became the most efficient tool of the Whigs."

Marx constantly exposed the corruption and coercive nature of the British Government in Ireland, particularly in the *New York Daily Tribune*. This was important as the British Government was very sensitive about the

growing influence of Irish public opinion in America. His article on the formation of the Lord Derby Government in 1857 was scathing of the corruption and jobbery in the way that posts were handed out to some of the most reactionary elements in the Irish administration:

'The formation of the Derby Cabinet involved the consequence that all Government places should be divided among a motley crew... Thus, Lord Eglinton, was to be enthroned Lord Lieutenant at Dublin Castle, and Lord Naas, notorious as a reckless partisan of Irish landlordism, was to be made his First Minister... The mere advent of a Tory Government, the mere occupancy of Dublin Castle by an Eglinton and Naas revived the hopes of the chopfallen Orangemen. The sun shone again on the 'true blues'; they would again lord it over the land as in the days of Castlereagh, and the day for taking their revenge had visibly dawned.'

Ireland and social revolution

By the 1850s the Chartist movement in Britain was in decline. Marx and Engels looked to Ireland for a movement or force that could drive forward the social revolution in England and Europe:

'I have become more and more convinced — and the only question is to bring this conviction home to the English working class — that it can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy with regard to Ireland in the most definite way from the policy of the ruling classes, but actually takes the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801 and replacing it by a free federal relationship. And indeed this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland, but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because it must join with them in a common front against Ireland.'

This was an important statement about how Imperialism not only subjugates the colonised country but also holds back the development of working-class consciousness in the imperial country in the way that it creates a false sense of a shared interest with the ruling classes.

Throughout the period of the First International (1864-72) Ireland played an important role in Marx's strategic vision for revolutionary change in Great Brit-

ain; 'transforming Ireland into the lever of a European-wide revolution'.

The Fenian Prisoners in Manchester

Marx, Engels, and Marx's daughters were to the forefront in campaigning to save the lives of the three Fenian prisoners condemned to death and known as the Manchester Martyrs - William Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien. In 1867, after a most dubious trial, they were executed for their part in a successful ambush to free two Fenian leaders from a prison van in which a policeman was killed. Marx raised the issues with The International Workingmen's Association who issued a statement written by Marx:

'The execution of the Irish prisoners condemned to death at Manchester... will bear the stamp not of a judicial act, but of political revenge.'

As a result of all this agitation more than 200,000 men and women of the English working-class marched in London to demand freedom for their Irish brothers and came out in defence of the rights of the Irish people against the English government. Engels in a letter to Marx outlined the political implications of the executions that should have served as a warning for the British authorities in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising:

'So yesterday morning the Tories... accomplished the final act of separation between England and Ireland. The only thing that the Fenians still lacked were martyrs. They have been provided with these by Derby and Hardy... To my knowledge, the only time that anybody has been executed for a similar matter in a civilised country was the case of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. The Fenians could not have wished for a better precedent. The Southerners had at least the decency to treat Brown as a *rebel*, whereas here everything is being done to transform a political attempt into a common crime'.

Jenny Marx wrote five articles for *La Marseillaise*, a French liberal newspaper, vividly describing how Irish political prisoners were treated in England. All of this agitation had an effect. Within weeks O'Donovan Rossa and most of the other prisoners were free and on their way to America. However, it seems that O'Donovan Rossa did little to show his appreciation for the agitation on his behalf. Marx in a letter to Frederick Sorge was outraged at his behaviour:

'As to O'Donovan Rossa... If any man was obliged, personally, to the *International* and the French Communards, it was he, and you have seen what thanks we have received at his hands'.

Capital

In Chapter 25 of volume one of *Capital* Marx devoted a substantial section to Ireland. He outlined the impact of the Famine and the catastrophic fall in the population as an illustration of 'The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation' and in particular the division or the proportion of capital that is divided into 'constant capital' and 'variable capital', or what Marx referred to as the 'organic composition of capital'. Marx deals with the question of surplus population or the over-supply of labour due to the impact of the agricultural revolution on farm labourers and smallholders.

Marx sets out in great detail and with extensive statistical data the impact of the agricultural revolution and the fall in population after the famine on Ireland's economy:

'The change of arable into pasture land, the use of machinery, the most rigorous economy of labour, etc., are still further aggravated by the model landlords, who, instead of spending their rents in other countries, condescend to live in Ireland on their demesnes. In order that the law of supply and demand may not be broken, these gentlemen draw their 'labour-supply ... chiefly from their small tenants, who are obliged to attend when required to do the landlord's work, at rates of wages, in many instances, considerably under the current rates paid to ordinary labourers'... The fact is that, as the Irish population diminishes, the Irish rent-rolls swell; that depopulation benefits the landlords'.

From his analysis of the Irish peasant economy Marx concluded that the means of production divided up amongst large numbers of very small agricultural holdings that serve as means of employment and of subsistence, without expanding their own value by the incorporation of the labour of others, are no more 'capital' than a product consumed by its own producer is a 'commodity'. This was an important point in explaining the impact of the agricultural revolution on the composition of capital. Marx summarised it as follows, using Ireland to make a general point: 'a part of the means of produc-

tion that were formerly scattered, was concentrated and turned into capital’.

Conclusion

After 1870 Marx’s attention turned away from Ireland. Firstly, the Paris Commune of 1871 demanded his attention and a reformulation of Marx and Engels’ theory of revolution. Secondly, the failure of the 1867 Fenian revolt and the conspiratorial and faction-ridden nature of the Fenian movement diminished Marx’s view of Ireland’s geopolitical importance in their evolving views on the possibility of a British and European socialist revolution.

Marx and Engels had always struggled to integrate Ireland into their theories on social and economic revolution; Ireland for them was always a ‘special case’ of ‘capitalist accumulation’. This legacy, and what became in many ways a misinterpretation of Marx and Engels’ position on Ireland has been a problem for socialists in Ireland for most of the twentieth century. Marx’s position has been wrongly interpreted by sections of the left to imply that Ireland was a ‘special case’; and what came to be known as the ‘stages theory’ which drew on Marx’s writing on Ireland, insisted that the national question in Ireland had to be solved before the class question. This was not Marx’s position – he was writing about the specific conditions in Ireland and England in the 1860s and 1870s – not developing a dogmatic theory of revolution for countries dominated by imperialism. In 1870 in a letter to his daughter Laura he made clear his position:

‘To accelerate the social development in Europe, you must push on the catastrophe of official England. To do so, you must attack her in Ireland. That’s her weakest point. Ireland lost, the British Empire is gone, and the class war in England, till now somnolent and chronic, will assume acute forms. England is the metropolis of landlordism and capitalism all over the world’.

That was a reasonable summary of Marx’s position in 1870. However, both the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 changed both the locus and dynamic of socialist revolution. But these movements were built on the theoretical framework of Karl Marx and his long time collaborator Frederick Engels.

Websites to access Marx and Engels on Ireland

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/ireland/index.htm>
<https://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=cserrep>

Books

Marx and Engels on Ireland (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).

Marx Engels Collected Works, 50 vols. (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975+).

Pricilla Metscher, *Republicanism and Socialism in Ireland* (Connolly Books, Dublin, 2016), Chapter 4.

Notes

- 1 Marxist.org archive, *Letter from Marx to Jenny Marx-Longuet* 31 May 1870.
- 2 Marxist.org archive, *Speech delivered in French in Brussels*, 22 February 1848.
- 3 *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).
- 4 K. Marx, *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 16 March 1855, *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).
- 5 K. Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, 11 January 1859, *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).
- 6 K. Marx, *Letters to Kugelmann*, 29 November 1869 (Martin Lawrence, London, n.d).
- 7 John Rodden, ‘The Lever Must Be Applied in Ireland’: Marx, Engels, and the Irish Question, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 70, no. 4 (Fall, 2008), pp. 609. Available on jstor.
- 8 *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).
- 9 K. Marx to Frederick Sorge, 29 November 1871, *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).
- 10 K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, 1954), p. 708.
- 11 K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, 1954), p. 703.
- 12 K. Marx to Paul and Laura Lafargue, 5 March 1870, *Marx and Engels on Ireland* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).