

Speaking at Marx's graveside in 1883 Engels said: Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation.¹

In fact there is a sense in which Marx was a revolutionist from before he was 'Marxist' or committed to the proletariat because he began his political life as a radical democrat and to be a radical democrat in Prussia or Europe in the early 1840s was to be a revolutionary. But before Marx the revolutionary movement was dominated by the Jacobin tradition inherited from the great French Revolution of 1789-94. This conceived of revolution as an action initiated and conducted by small groups of, mainly middle class, conspirators acting on behalf of 'the people' who were to be liberated from above. However, Marx's discovery of the revolutionary role of the working class in 1843-4, under the influence of the struggle of the Silesian weavers, of his encounters with communist workers in Paris and of his friend Engels in Manchester, enabled him to develop a whole new concept of revolution as mass self-emancipation from below.

In 1845 in *The German Ideology* he wrote: this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.²



Revolution

Mary Smith

This notion of the revolution as a process of mass struggle in which the working class would transform itself and its ideas, ridding itself of 'the muck of ages' (racism, sexism, deference, religious superstitions and hatreds and so on) so as to be able itself to take over the running of society was, and remains, distinctively Marxist and is of huge philosophical and political significance.³

In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, also written in 1845, Marx writes:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.⁴

And when in 1850 the revolutions of 1848 had been defeated and fellow members of the Communist League, Willich and Schapper, wished to artificially re-activate the revolution with a plan to raise an army and invade Germany, Marx responded that they made 'the will rather than the actual conditions... the chief factor in the revolution':

We tell the workers: If you want to change conditions and make yourselves capable of government, you will have to undergo fifteen, twenty or fifty years of civil war. Now they are told: We must come to power immediately or we might as well go to sleep.⁵

Revolution, Marx insisted, could not be created by will power. In November 1850 he wrote:

In view of the general prosperity which now prevails and permits the productive forces of bourgeois society to develop as rapidly as is at all possible

within the framework of bourgeois society, there can be no question of any real revolution... A new revolution will be made possible only as a result of a new crisis, but it is just as certain as is the coming of the crisis itself.⁶

And in 1859 he outlined the broad historical preconditions for revolution as follows;

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution... No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.⁷

However, this emphasis on material preconditions and objective circumstances, which was necessary to counter the hankering after voluntarist conspiracy that was so prevalent in the movement in Marx's day, for example with both the French revolutionary, August Blanqui, and the Russian anarchist Bakunin, does not mean that Marx had a passive or fatalist attitude to revolution once it broke out. On the contrary his experience of the 1848 Revolutions and of the Paris Commune showed him that revolutions had a momentum that had to be maintained by energetic and dynamic action.

Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them... Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline, and habitual authority: unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and

ruined. Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattering, prepare new successes, however small, but daily; keep up the moral ascendancy which the first successful rising has given to you; rally those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse, and which always look out for the safer side; force your enemies to a retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest master of revolutionary policy yet known, *de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace!*⁸

Later Marx criticised the Paris Commune of 1871, of which he was the most passionate supporter, for its failure to seize control of the Bank of France and to take the initiative by marching on the counterrevolutionary headquarters of Versailles at the decisive moment and for its Central Committee surrendering power too quickly to the elected Commune.

They should have marched at once on Versailles ...The right moment was missed because of conscientious scruples. They did not want to start the civil war, as if that mischievous abortion Thiers had not already started the civil war with his attempt to disarm Paris. Second mistake: The Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune. Again from a too "honourable" scrupulosity!⁹

For Marx the great aim of the socialist revolution was the social and economic emancipation of the working class

That the economical subjection of the man of labor to the monopolizer of the means of labor – that is, the source of life – lies at the bottom of servitude in all its forms, of all social misery, mental degradation, and political dependence;

That the economical emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means;¹⁰

And that the proletariat should 'wrest by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State ie of the

proletariat organised as the ruling class'.¹¹

But to achieve this, Marx always insisted, involved a political struggle. The proletariat had to conquer political power and that necessitated the formation of a workers' political party.

Against the collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes.

This constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to insure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end - the abolition of classes.¹²

But what exactly is meant by the working class conquering political power? Does it for example mean just mean winning an election and becoming the government, as social democrats and reformists have believed for over a hundred years? Or does it mean capturing the state by means of an uprising? This raises the question of the nature of the capitalist state and on this Marx's thinking underwent an important development which plays a crucial part in his theory of revolution.

From the very start Marx rejected the dominant narrative of the state as a neutral body standing above the classes and their conflicts representing the interests of society as a whole. In his early *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* he attacked the state as a hierarchical, bureaucratic and parasitical growth controlling the wider population and opposed to the interests of the majority. In the *Communist Manifesto* he wrote that

...since the establishment of modern industry and the world market [the bourgeoisie] has conquered for itself, in the modern parliamentary state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.¹³

Also in the Manifesto, he spoke of 'the first step in the revolution by working class [being] to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class'. But at his stage Marx was not yet really able to explain what these general phrases meant in practice. In 1852, after the experience of the 1848 Revolutions, he wrote that 'the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*'.¹⁴ But what that meant in institutional terms was still unclear.

It was the experience of the Paris Commune, the first historical example of workers' power, of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' in action (albeit only in one city and for only 74 days) that enabled Marx to clarify this. Marx, the greatest of all theoreticians, learned from the actual struggle of the working class. What the Paris Commune showed was, first and foremost, that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the readymade state machinery and wield it for its own purposes'.¹⁵ The measures taken, or planned, by the Commune also gave a more concrete idea of what workers' power would look like. A lengthy quote from *The Civil War in France* is necessary here:

Paris could resist only because, in consequence of the siege, it had got rid of the army, and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men. This fact was now to be transformed into an institution. The first decree of the Commune, therefore, was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people. The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. Instead of continuing to be the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workman's wage. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune. Having once got rid of the standing army and the police - the physical force elements of the old government - the Commune was anxious to break

the spiritual force of repression, the “parson-power”, by the disestablishment and disendowment of all churches as proprietary bodies. The priests were sent back to the recesses of private life, there to feed upon the alms of the faithful in imitation of their predecessors, the apostles.

The whole of the educational institutions were opened to the people gratuitously, and at the same time cleared of all interference of church and state. Thus, not only was education made accessible to all, but science itself freed from the fetters which class prejudice and governmental force had imposed upon it.

The judicial functionaries were to be divested of that sham independence which had but served to mask their abject subserviency to all succeeding governments to which, in turn, they had taken, and broken, the oaths of allegiance. Like the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible, and revocable.¹⁶

This remarkable passage forms the basis for the Marxist view of revolutionary government down to the present day. Three principles in particular stand out: the recallability of all representatives, their payment at average workers’ wages and the separation of church and state. Their relevance for socialist practice in Ireland today is glaringly obvious.

Notes

1 Frederick Engels’ *Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx, Highgate Cemetery, London, March 17 1883*. [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death-burial.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death-burial.htm)

2 Karl Marx *The German Ideology* available at [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm)

3 It sharply distinguishes Marx’s concept of revolution from that all notions of revolution from above or by guerrilla armies of various Stalinists, Maoists, Guevarists and Republicans.

4 Karl Marx *Theses On Feuerbach* [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm)

5 Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist League, in *Karl Marx: The Revolutions of 1848*, London 1981, p341.

6 Cited in John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, London 1986, p93.

7 Karl Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

8 These lines are from Fredrick Engels, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Germany*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/germany/ch17.htm>. But this series of articles, though written by Engels, were first published in Marx’s name, and consequently were often cited as Marx’s words by Lenin and others, especially as a guide to action in October 1917. It is reasonable to assume they represented the joint view of Marx and Engels.

9 Karl Marx, *Letter to L. Kugelmann, April 15, 1871*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_04_12.htm

10 Rules of the First International, *Karl Marx: The First International and After*, London 1974 p.82 <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>

11 *The Communist Manifesto*.

12 Karl Marx, *Resolution on the establishment of political parties, to the Hague Conference of the First International, 1872*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1872/hague-conference/parties.htm>

13 Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels *The Communist Manifesto* [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm)

14 Karl Marx, Letter to J. Weydemeyer, March 5 1852 in *Marx and Engels, Selected Works*, Vol 2, Moscow 1962, p.452.

15 This is a quotation from Marx’s *The Civil War in France* (1871), which Marx and Engels introduced as a ‘correction’ to the Communist Manifesto in their Preface of 1872. It also formed the basis for Lenin’s great work of 1917, *The State and Revolution*, which develops the whole argument much further.

16 Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, Peking 1966, p.67-68 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>