CHAPTER 6

The Irish Question in Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's Writings on Capitalism and Empire

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Few nineteenth-century formulations of Ireland's suffering under British rule were as explicit as those of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in focusing away from essentialist explanations cast in the language of British villainy, and in concentrating instead on material factors, on the conjoined expansion of capitalism in Britain and underdevelopment in Ireland. This is plainly evident even in the very manner in which Ireland features in the chapter organisation of their explicitly theoretical work. Ellen Hazelkorn points out that, by placing consideration of Irish agriculture in the chapter headed the 'General Law of Capitalist Accumulation', Marx scorned the historicist argument that focused attention on the Act of Union and English anti-Irishness, and turned to evaluate how the transference of capital, foodstuffs, and labour from Ireland to England formed an integral and necessary part of their respective economic growth (Hazelkorn 1981: 26).

The systemic underpinnings of British rule in Ireland have subsequently tended to be under-discussed: it is hard to believe that it is still necessary to go back to the writings of Marx and Engels to be reminded of this key element in the relationship between England and Ireland. Indeed, Eamonn Slater and Terrence McDonough have observed that even the rise of postcolonial theory in Ireland has not helped to mitigate the inattention to political economy that characterises the field of Irish studies (Slater and McDonough 1994: 63–4).

THE TRANSITION FROM FEUDALISM TO CAPITALISM IN IRELAND

It will be a useful first step to consider commentaries on Marx's and Engels's writings on Ireland that do echo their political economy emphasis. In their work on Ireland, Marx and Engels wrote mainly in the second half of the

nineteenth century *about* the second half of the nineteenth century. The literature on their Irish writings quickly leads into a transition debate transposed to Ireland, the central issue being what Karl Kautsky called 'the agrarian question' and defined as follows:

> Is capital, and in what ways is capital, taking hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, smashing the old forms of production and of poverty and establishing the new forms which must succeed? (Kautsky 1988: 46)

Ellen Hazelkorn's starting point is a little-noticed passage about Ireland in *Capital* Volume One where Marx argues that capitalist relations were beginning to take hold in Irish agriculture after the famine. Agricultural production was increasingly being moulded to British requirements (for example, by the substitution of pasture for tillage), there was greater consolidation and concentration of land ownership, and rapid proletarianisation in the Irish countryside was giving rise to emigration and the swelling of the industrial reserve army of labour in Britain. This transition had been hastened after the famine, in Marx's view, by the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Encumbered Estates Acts.

Using historical research by David Fitzpatrick and Cormac Ó Gráda, Hazelkorn shows that Marx was mistaken about the emergence of capitalist agriculture in Ireland, and that small farmers had successfully been able to resist proletarianisation for a good while longer. The tendency towards centralisation and consolidation that Marx saw in the immediate post-famine years was stalled, even reversed in later decades. The political consequence of this misreading, she says, is that Marx and Engels were unprepared for the way that the Land League movement evolved. Much later, in 1888, Engels ruefully admitted to the true property-desiring character of the movement:

> A purely socialist movement cannot be expected in Ireland for a considerable time. People there want first of all to become peasants owning a plot of land, and after they have achieved that mortgages will appear on the scene and they will be ruined once more. But this should not prevent us from seeking to help them to get rid of their landlords, that is, to pass from semi-feudal conditions to capitalist conditions (Marx and Engels 1971: 343).

Hazelkorn faults the inadequacy of their analysis of class in the Irish countryside – a dismal contrast to their sophisticated analysis of the French agrarian classes – for their misrecognition of land politics and economics in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Slater and McDonough cast the transition debate in entirely different terms. They note that, in *Capital* Volume Three, Marx states correctly that

the feudal mode of production was still intact in Ireland in the nineteenth century, as evidenced in the fact that the Irish rental form was not yet a capitalist ground rent (Slater and McDonough 1994: 73–4). So their argument is that it is not Marx, but the conventional readings of Marx, that are mistaken. For example, they fault Mokyr and Ó Gráda for not discussing the feudal nature of the rent relationship (Slater and McDonough 1994: 111n). For Slater and McDonough, this amounts to an implicit acceptance of the notion of a capitalist rent relationship. Somewhat surprisingly, they do not challenge Hazelkorn's reading of Marx, which is very much at odds with theirs, but they do explicitly take issue with Ó Gráda, even though his findings about the postponement of proletarianisation basically buttress their thesis of the continued existence of feudalism.

In any case, even if we go along with Hazelkorn's reading that Marx and Engels mistakenly saw capitalist relations developing in Irish agriculture, they were off by only a few decades. Hazelkorn herself admits that capitalist relations came to prevail in Irish agriculture quite soon after. Also, if they were wrong about the Land League, they were certainly not alone; Michael Davitt was famously disappointed in the failure of his land nationalisation project to take hold among small farmers (Davitt 1991: 280).

ASIATIC MODES AND OTHER ANALYTICAL HAZARDS

A comparison with that other colonial context which Marx discussed extensively – India under British rule – helps place in perspective the flaws in their analysis of Irish agriculture. A relatively minor error of periodisation in Ireland is emphatically not a clunker of the magnitude of the 'Asiatic' mode of production, a conception that resulted in Marx arguing – over a fairly sustained period – that colonialism had beneficial tonic effects for its Asian subjects. By contrast, he never presented the colonial relationship as an even potentially positive one for Ireland; notwithstanding changes in emphasis and at times even a change of mind on key processes, his analysis of Irish history and society under British rule was always more critical.

Despite the risk of being sidetracked into the issues and debates raised by the unfortunate formulation, it may be worthwhile to remember that the two key characteristics of the Asiatic mode were seen by Marx to be the unchanging village community and the despotic nature of the Oriental state, where rent and tax were coterminous because the sovereign owned all land. According to Irfan Habib (30–4), it is evident that Marx began to entertain serious doubts about the whole 'Asiatic' concept after 1867, going by marginal notes he took on later readings – on Elphinstone's *History of India*, Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* and most notably Kovalevsky's

Communal Landholding. He came seriously to doubt the idea of the stagnant, unchanging village community. He also came to realise that land ownership in pre-British India was a far more complex issue than he had at first grasped.

Later doubts about the Asiatic mode notwithstanding, Marx was decidedly positive about colonialism's transformative possibilities in his Indian commentary, a mood that one does not encounter in the Irish material. In an 1853 *New York Tribune* article, he describes the railways as being 'truly the forerunner of modern industry' in India (Marx and Engels 2001: 73). He referred to England's 'double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia'. Asiatic village life, he thought, 'restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies' (Marx and Engels 2001: 65). It is this passage, and the numerous others like it scattered through his articles on India, that prompted Edward Said to label Marx an 'orientalist'.

However, even in this early (1853), apparently positive mindset in regards to colonialism in India, Marx was clear that the misery inflicted by the British was 'infinitely more intensive' (Marx and Engels 2001: 62) than anything experienced to date on the subcontinent; British rule was nothing short of 'swinish' (Marx and Engels 2001: 18).

Marx particularly, and Engels to a lesser degree, followed the insurgency of 1857 in India closely. In September of that year, Marx wrote that 'the outrages committed by the revolted sepoys in India are indeed appalling' – and then proceeded to offer a luminous, excoriating critique of British hypocrisy and brutality in the following words: the outrages, he wrote, were of a type that 'respectable England' used to admire when committed against the old enemy, France. More tellingly, however, he offers the following explanation for the violence:

> However infamous the conduct of the sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India . . . even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. To characterize that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself. (Marx and Engels 2001: 82)

This insight about the violence of the anti-colonial movement would reappear almost exactly one hundred years later in the work of writers such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi.

Marx describes reading letters of British officers that were 'redolent of malignity' (Marx and Engels 2001: 83). Indeed, some of the offending

passages he selected, together with the summary justice meted out to many an innocent, are starkly reminiscent of the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland.

Marx preferred the term 'First War of Indian Independence' to the more demeaning 'mutiny' as a label for the events of 1857; but he saw quickly that there would be no sustained movement in the immediate future. Still, four years before 1857, he was abundantly clear about the desirability of Indian independence. Both Habib and Aijaz Ahmad make a great deal of the following 1853 quote from Marx:

> The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the new ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus [read, Indians] themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether. (Marx and Engels 2001: 73)

Ahmad points out that 'no influential Indian reformer of the nineteenth century . . . was to take so clear-cut a position on the issue of Indian independence' (Marx and Engels 2001: 20), and that Gandhi would spend the years of the First World War recruiting soldiers for the war effort (in much the same way as did Redmond in Ireland, and for near-identical reasons).

Nearly thirty years after that breathless 1853 ode to the railways, Marx was to become more cautious about colonialism's offerings. In 1881 he wrote, in a letter to N. F. Danielson, about the 'bleeding process' that empire forced on India, and even referred to the previously much-vaunted railways as 'useless to the Hindoos' (Marx and Engels 2001: 104). There are, thus, ambiguities and significant changes of position in Marx's and Engels's corpus of writings on India. However, although we too disagree with Edward Said's dismissal of Marx as a 'romantic orientalist', it nevertheless seems to us that scholarship such as Ahmad's and Habib's doth protest too much on this point.

Consider Habib's response to the following line from the same 1853 article by Marx: 'Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power' (Marx and Engels 2001: 73). Determined to rehabilitate even such an extravagant claim as this, Habib writes: 'This was confident prophecy; and the Indian working class has largely fulfilled it though not to the extent, perhaps, that Marx might have expected' (Habib 1995: 56). It takes a staggering amount of wishful thinking to imagine that caste has been 'largely' broken down in contemporary India. Similarly, while Ahmad concedes that 'the writings of Marx and Engels are indeed contaminated in several places with the usual

banalities of nineteenth-century Eurocentrism, and [that] the general prognosis they offered about the social stagnation of our societies was often based on unexamined staples of conventional European histories' (Ahmad 1992: 229), he does seem to go to an inordinate amount of trouble to demonstrate the relatively unchanging character of the Indian village community.

It seems to us that honest criticism needs to play a crucial role in any serious engagement with the colonial writings of Marx and Engels. It is precisely the unsatisfactory nature of some of their analysis of colonialism which helps account for twentieth-century Marxism's preoccupation with the subject, from Lenin's pioneering *Imperialism* to Ernest Mandel's finely drawn picture of combined and uneven development in his *Late Capitalism*.

While it is important to be critical, we remain acutely aware of the danger of the false paradox. For example, in the context of the very comparison that we have been making between Marx's writings on Ireland and India, Ivan Vujacic detects, in our view unjustly, an analytic slant in favour of Ireland. Juxtaposing one of those passages where Marx congratulates British colonialism for breaking up India's stagnant social structure with his analysis of Ireland in *Capital*, Vujacic writes:

> His analysis of the situation in Ireland, which was also a colony of Great Britain, is quite different. In the chapter on the general law of capitalist accumulation in *Capital*, Marx draws an empirical sketch of the systematic impoverishment of Ireland and the subjugation of its economic structure to the needs of English capital, with all the social consequences that spring from such a process. (Vujacic 1988: 476)

According to Vujacic, Marx is discriminating in favour of Ireland here in the sense that Ireland enters centrally into his analysis of capitalism whereas India does not. In fact, it is not Marx but British imperial policy on migration that happens to be discriminating in favour of Ireland. The Irish people fleeing rural poverty could find employment in the mills of industrial Britain, whereas Indians fleeing rural poverty were not allowed to exercise such an option. Chapter twenty-five of *Capital* Volume One deals with the industrial reserve army of labour, and Ireland enters here precisely because it had been enabled by colonial policy to make a sizeable labour contribution to the industrial revolution in Britain. Even granted the lack of peasant proletarianisation in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, as noted by Hazelkorn, and also by Slater and McDonough, it is nonetheless true that there were significant numbers of Irish workers to be found in every British industrial town. Given that Indians were dragged to various parts of the British Empire as indentured workers, but were prevented from freely emigrating in

search of work to any part of the Empire or to Britain, it is hardly surprising that an analysis of the British working class should exclude a consideration of the Indian colonial context. These issues of labour mobility and restrictions thereon were crucial then and still have resonance today.

IN DEFENCE OF NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

Perhaps the most important emphasis we have derived from Ahmad and Habib is their stress on Marx's and Engels's unambiguous support for anti-colonial movements. The latter did, certainly, have a great deal to say on the subject, both in the Irish and Indian contexts. Indeed, the anarchist Bakunin famously attacked Marx and the Communist International for being overly interested in Irish nationalism, at the expense of the international working-class movement.

Marx and Engels took an active interest in the Fenian movement; they were closely involved in the attempt to force the British government to put an end to the cruel treatment of Fenian prisoners in British and Irish jails in the aftermath of the Fenian rising of 1867. Marx between 1869 and 1870 wrote stinging critiques of this treatment, in which he argued that 'there is no country in Europe where political prisoners are treated like in England and Russia' (Marx and Engels 1971: 153). His comments also demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the situation of particular prisoners (such as O'Donovan Rossa, kept for 35 days in a darkened cell, hands tied behind his back; Martin Carey, locked up in a lunatic asylum; Denis Mulcahy, harnessed to a cart and bound with a metal band around his neck) – a knowledge that may surprise those who think of Marx as being interested solely in the broad sweep of history (Marx and Engels 1971: 164–5).

Engels, on a personal level, was closer than Marx to the Irish situation through his long association and marriage ties with the Lancashire-Irish and Fenian-connected Burns family. Around 1870 he prepared a large amount of material for a history of Ireland, and completed two chapters – one on 'Natural conditions' and the other on 'Ancient Ireland'. He visited Ireland three times, in 1856, in 1869, and again in 1891. Just after the second visit (two years after the Fenian Rising) he described the country in a letter to Marx as being in a

> state of war. . . There are squads of Royal Irish all over the place, with sheath-knives, and occasionally a revolver at their side and a police baton in their hand; in Dublin a horse-drawn battery drove right through the centre of town, a thing I have never seen in England, and there are soldiers literally everywhere. (Marx and Engels 1971: 273–4)

However, it was Engels rather than Marx who tended to be much more immoderate in the remarks he indulged in on the nature of 'the Irish'. Often in the context of a positive line (e.g. 'Give me 200,000 Irishmen and I could overthrow the entire British monarchy'), he could apparently happily conjure up the image of 'wild, headstrong, fanatical Gaels', or dismiss 'the Irishman' as a 'light-hearted, cheerful, potato-eating child of nature' who, 'straight from the moorland, where he grew up under a leaky roof fed on weak tea and short commons . . . is suddenly flung into our civilisation'. Another vivid psycho-social picture is that of the Irishman who gets his political education in England (in the 'mechanistic, frigid and egoistic bustle of the English industrial town') and who returns home with a point to his rage, 'capable of anything', and ready to lash out furiously whenever he sees an opportunity (Marx and Engels 1971: 33–4). There is no shortage of this kind of cartoon-like characterisation and, of the two, Engels tends to be the more guilty of it; but Marx too could slip into a mode of analysis whereby he contrasted the firebrand Irish with the stolid Anglo-Saxon.

This curious use of stereotype, paradoxically, goes hand in hand with Marx's perceptive refutation, in the *Capital* chapter already discussed, of the Malthusian view that Ireland's poverty was caused by its over-population. Just as it is today, Malthusian language was an important idiom in which racism was expressed in the nineteenth century, and Marx used the Irish example to articulate a powerful critique.

Although stereotype occasionally appeared in their writing, their political arguments did not hinge on it. Marx and Engels admired the Fenian movement for being 'socialist', 'lower-class', 'republican' and non-sectarian (Marx and Engels 1971: 124). Marx, in a November 1867 letter to Engels, reports that he had been planning to make a speech on Ireland at a meeting of the International's General Council, only to yield the floor because 'our subject, Fenianism, was liable to inflame the passions to such heat that I . . . would have been forced to hurl revolutionary thunderbolts instead of soberly analysing the state of affairs and the movement as I had intended' (Marx and Engels 1971: 147). This was clearly a subject close to Marx's engagé heart. Notwithstanding their broad support for the Fenian movement and instinctive humanitarian outrage about the treatment of Fenian prisoners, it must be said that Marx and Engels did come to entertain serious doubts about Fenianism. In a November 1867 letter to Marx, Engels writes as follows:

> As regards the Fenians you are quite right. The beastliness of the English must not make us forget that the leaders of this sect are mostly asses and partly exploiters and we cannot in any way make ourselves responsible for the stupidities which occur in every conspiracy. And they are certain to happen. (Marx and Engels 1971: 145–6)

Marx and Engels criticised the tendency of the Fenian leadership and their sympathisers to stick to a narrowly national line. In a letter to Engels of December 1869, Marx complains about the tendency to insist that the 'Irish question' be treated as 'something quite separate, apart from the rest of the world', and to conceal the extent of support for the Irish among certain sections of the English working class (Marx and Engels 1971: 282).

They also had problems with Fenian methods. In a June 1882 letter to Eduard Bernstein, Engels complained that the Fenians 'are . . . increasingly being pushed into a sort of Bakuninism' (Marx and Engels 1971: 336), as evidenced by the Phoenix Park murders which Engels regarded as ill-advised and counter-productive (we know now that he was mistaken in blaming these murders on the Fenians, when they were in fact carried out by a group known as 'The Invincibles'). By this stage, Engels regarded Parnell as Ireland's best medium-term possibility, and he thought that actions like the Phoenix Park murders would only serve to impede Parnell's work.

Marx, who had previously held the view that Ireland would be freed by the revolution of the working class in England, now came to have serious doubts on this score. He says as much in a December 1869 letter to Engels:

> For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working-class ascendancy. I always expressed this point of view in the *New-York Tribune*. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. (Marx and Engels 1971: 284)

This lever, successfully 'applied', would short-circuit what Marx one year later described as the profound antagonism between the Irish proletariat and the English proletariat (Marx and Engels 1971: 293). His hope was that some kind of resolution of the national question in Ireland, together with revolutionary success in Ireland – identified as the fall of landlordism – would lead to something similar in England. This notion of Ireland exporting revolution to England might seem curious (in the same piece, Marx writes that of all countries in Europe 'England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic revolution'); it is worth bearing in mind that he makes this claim for Ireland partly by way of answering Bakunin's critique. But this was no mere defensiveness on Marx's part. His response to Bakunin was forceful and persuasive (as judged by votes in the General Council of the International and within the Geneva branch). Indeed, in this interchange it is Bakunin who sticks to what some might see as a 'rigid Marxian position' that keeps nationalist struggles strictly at arm's length, and Marx who shows himself to be the more flexible thinker.

James Connolly would later say something similar about the social and national questions: with the national question resolved, Irish working-class voters in English cities would end their counter-intuitive connection with the Liberal Party and start to vote for the Labour Party, the party they should naturally support (Connolly 1991 [1914]: 726). Connolly also, of course, saw resolution of Ireland's national question as a precursor to any transformation of Irish society (Connolly 1991 [1897]: 718–9).

So, we can be clear on the later Marx's hopes for the Irish question's impact on English labour. But how did he and Engels see the development of an independent (or semi-independent) Ireland? They do not offer a great deal of analysis on that score, though they did support Home Rule as the optimum medium-term solution for Ireland. Firstly, however, in that same December 1869 letter, Marx says that, quite aside from any benefit that might accrue to English labour, resolution of the Irish question was a matter of '"international" and "human" justice for Ireland' (Marx and Engels 1971: 284). In other words, it is far from the case that he concerned himself with Ireland solely owing to the role he foresaw it playing in the more significant English context.

CONCLUSION

We see a readiness in the writings of Marx and Engels to change their perspectives in the light of new evidence on the socio-economic transformation in Ireland and the Irish political situation – for example, on the development of capitalist relations in agriculture, or about the nature of the Land League, or on the revolutionary potential of the Fenians. What remains constant, however, is their solid grasp of the material underpinnings of the colonial relationship, as shown for example, in chapter twenty-five of *Capital* Volume One: they saw agrarian change and political movements in Ireland as being inextricably tied in with the shifts in industrial capitalism in Britain. This is a key issue about the Irish–English relationship which they grasped while it was still in motion, and which gets passed over all too often in more recent historical treatments.

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