

04. Marx, on political strategy, the U.S. Civil War and Ireland February 2009

Page numbers are from your photocopies selections of Ireland and the Irish Question (1971) and The Civil War in the United States (1961).

Key points

- Marx in the 1860s
- Ireland and the U.S.
- Marx the agitator
- Slavery and capitalism

I. Marx in the 1860s

A. Life In London

1. After being kicked out of Germany, Paris, and Brussels, in August 1849 he finally settled in London, where he lived for the rest of his life.

2. Marx spent most of his time doing research and writing in the **British Museum**. He was a ferocious reader and writer, and he often spent 10 hours a day (9 am to 7 pm) studying in the Museum, and then went home, at dinner with his family, and then worked into the night.

3. The **Marxes' poverty** begins in London and lasts for about 20 years.

4. **Read** Berlin 159-160 for a Prussian spy's description of the Marx home.

5. Three of his 6 children died due to poverty-related afflictions. (When one of his daughters died, they had no money for a coffin.) **Read**, Berlin 162 if time. Wow.

6. He himself was also often quite ill (due also to his constant smoking). So, **he understood poverty and poor health** first hand. **Read** from Berlin 160-161 if time.

B. Journalism

1. Marx depended on money from Engels and "loans" from various socialist friends for financial support. (He once tried to get a job as a clerk in a railway office, but his clothes were too tattered and his handwriting was deemed illegible, Berlin 189.)

2. Desperate, he also turned to journalism to make some money. He was a European correspondent for the New York Tribune and also wrote for European papers. He didn't like writing journalism because it distracted him from his studies. Often Engels would write the articles for him.

C. The International

1. Marx and Engels were active politically throughout their lives. They joined the **Communist League** in 1847. The *Communist Manifesto* was the manifesto for that organization.

2. In 1864 they helped found the **International Working Men's Association**. In addition to demanding a shorter working day, higher wages, and political representation for the working class, the International sought to build proletarian revolution and the abolition of private property by linking up revolutionary working class organizations throughout the world and providing intellectual leadership to working class movements. It also offered strike support and help for political refugees.

3. The International grew rapidly in England, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. Especially notorious during the Paris Commune of 1871.

4. Marx served on its General Council for 7 years (1864-1872). He basically led the organization, and pretty much ruled with an iron hand.

5. The International **disbanded in 1872** when Marx moved the headquarters to NYC in order to keep it out of the hands of Bakunin and the anarchists. The Second International was founded by Engels and others in 1889, after Marx's death.

II. Ireland and the U.S.

A. The significance of England and the U.S. for proletarian revolution

1. **England** is the "metropolis of capital" (161, 294). It's the country where capitalism and class relations are the most advanced: no peasants, fully industrialized, economy fully based on wage labor, disciplined working class, a colonial power.

2. The **United States** is the most progressive country, "the only popular government in the world." It's the only country where the working class has the vote and thus real political power (this is why he believes a nonviolent revolution is possible in the U.S.).

3. All the **material prerequisites** for communist revolution exist in both countries, in other words, and once revolution is unleashed in these places (especially England), it will spread throughout the world.

4. But what both countries lack is "**revolutionary fervor**" (161). The question is why?

B. In **England**, the proletariat is divided into "**two hostile camps**" (162 and 293; Marx deliberately lifts this line from the Manifesto).

1. The English working class sees itself as **superior to the Irish working class**, and thereby props up the English capitalist landlords in Ireland and thus in England. This division also undermines class unity in England.

2. Further, Ireland's "surplus population" (i.e. immigrants) comes to England, flood the labor market, and drives down wages and living conditions. 293

3. **Q:** Sound familiar? The Irish are the Blacks and Mexicans of the United States. But Marx argues that the solution is not to kick the Irish out because they are "illegal" or "inferior."

4. **Read 293-294.**

5. What is needed is to overthrow the English "landed aristocracy," or landlords, in Ireland. This will weaken them in England, too, which is a "preliminary condition" for proletarian revolution in England (293). And the group arguing to overthrow this aristocracy in Ireland are the Irish nationalists, who oppose England's occupation of Ireland. The "**land question**" in Ireland is inseparable from the "**national question**" there (293).

6. Thus, the English working class needs to overcome its hatred of the Irish and **support the Irish struggle to overthrow English rule** ("Union"), not to be nice but because **it's in their interests** to do so.

7. **Read 294**

C. In the U.S., under slavery the proletariat is **likewise broken up into hostile camps**, white vs. Black, Northern vs. Southern.

1. The **slaveholders** controlled the federal government and used their power to **attack free labor** throughout the nation. This is exemplified in their desire to expand slavery throughout the western territories (Kansas, etc.), and in fact to create a slave republic from Canada to South America. The South, by seeking to expand slavery, seeks to drive the working class everywhere into slavery (79). The Civil War is thus sounded "the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor" (280).

2. The **poor whites in the South** are kept allied with the relatively small number of slaveholders by conquest ("filibustering expeditions"), which like the Roman plebians, gives them various privileges (bread and circuses) or wages (69). These expeditions to expand slave territory divert the rebellious tendencies of the poor whites and give them hope that someday they can be slaveholders, too. In this way the poor whites in the South come to hate the slaves and the poor whites in the North. They ally with the slaveholding class (the Southern capitalist class) and reject alliances with the Black working class in the South (slaves) and with the Northern working class (Black and white).

3. But this alliance with the slaveholders **keeps the Southern whites poor and exploited**. Slavery keeps their wages and living conditions down. If allowed to spread, slavery will drive all poor whites throughout the Americas into "helotry," or serfdom.

4. The **Northern working class** is "the true political power of the North," but their support for slavery has kept them from exercising their power to attain "the true freedom of labor." They insisted that the **privilege of being white** was to be able to sell one's own labor, i.e. the right to be "free labor," not enchained labor.

5. The **white working class cannot be free** so long as slavery exists. It is thus **in their interests to fight for the abolition of slavery**, just as it's in the English wc's interest to support Irish emancipation.

6. The Civil War, Marx hopes, will sweep this "barrier to progress" away, leaving nothing to prevent the wc from using their poly power to create true freedom. (Maybe this is why Marx believed socialism could be achieved nonviolently in the US, especially after the CW.)

D. He thus supports **Irish nationalism and abolitionism**. He doesn't do this because he supports identity politics or for moral reasons (though he does morally oppose oppression), but because Irish nationalism and abolition are **crucial to the class struggle**.

1. **Read** 163, 280-281 on Ireland, and *Capital* 284, and then 280-281 (letter to Lincoln) on the U.S.

a. [From *Capital*: "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. ..." (Capital, p. 284.)]

2. For class struggle to happen on terms in which the proletariat can win, slavery and racism must be swept away. Only once that happens can the struggle for the 8-hour day take place.

III. Karl Marx, agitator

x. Note that Marx is a **political organizer** here. He's a strategist and an agitator.

x. "But 'the South' is neither a territory completely detached from the North geographically nor a moral unity. It is not a country at all, but a battle slogan." (CW in the US, 72)

x. His writings on American and the CW reveal a **Marx that is not a determinist** by any means. He mostly talks politics, and his political analyses are based on his (largely accurate) assessment of the conflict between the two social systems. This conflict may be the "base," but his writings reveal no such base/superstructure dichotomy nor is political maneuvering—by elites and masses—regarded as insignificant.

IV. Slavery and capitalism

x. Marx was convinced, as he wrote Engels on January 11, 1860, that the "slave movement" in the U.S. and Russia (i.e. peasants resisting serfdom) was "the most momentous thing happening in the world today." Slave uprisings, "started by the death of Brown," promise the beginning of the emancipation of the working class.

x. Marx, in other words, saw antislavery movement as central to wc emancipation, and he saw the **slaves as part of the wc**.

x. Marx saw slavery in the Americas as **part of the world capitalist system**, because it contributes to capitalist accumulation. Slavery was central to capitalism because it provided the cotton needed for the hungry machines producing textiles in the Industrial Revolution. Slavery is thus not a different mode of production. "In ... plantations—where commercial speculations figure from the start and production is intended for the world market, the capitalist mode of production exists, although only in a formal sense, since the slavery of Negroes precludes free wage labor, which is the basis of capitalist production. But the business in which slaves are used is conducted by *capitalists*. The method of production which they introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted onto it." (Padover 29, from *Theories of Surplus Value*, part II, Chap. XII) So slavery is "grafted" on to capitalism.