

The Multiplicity of Struggles for Recognition and the Conflict of Liberties

I THE RANKING OF CLASS STRUGGLES

At their best, when they overcome the binary logic into which, notwithstanding their theoretical premises, they sometimes lapse, Marx and Engels found themselves confronting the problem I have already mentioned. A determinate historical situation is always characterized by a variegated multiplicity of conflicts; and any conflict involves the presence of a multiplicity of social subjects, who express different, opposing interests and ideas. To get one's bearings in this kind of labyrinth, it is necessary to examine not only the internal configuration of each of these conflicts but also how they are articulated and structured in a concrete totality. Mastering a theoretical crisis is a challenge theoretically, as well as politically.

The tangle of political and social, national and international conflicts that erupted in Central-Eastern Europe between 1848 and 1849 represents such a challenge. The Habsburg Empire was shaken to its foundations by a major revolution that radically challenged the *ancien régime*. Metternich managed to suppress it by skilfully exploiting aspirations to autonomy and self-government on the part of various Slav minorities, who did not identify with the government that was being established in Vienna and Budapest. But it was the intervention of tsarist Russia that sealed the defeat of the revolution. We find ourselves facing a set of demands and rights which, taken in isolation, are all legitimate and, in fact, sacrosanct.

It is their conjunction that represents a problem and creates dilemmas. Given their head by Metternich and Nicholas I, the national aspirations of various peoples not only furnished reserves for putting down the revolution in Vienna and Budapest but also reinforced the expansionism of tsarist Russia, which was the bulwark of European reaction.

So how was the situation to be handled? In early November 1848, Marx compared the tragedy being played out in Central and Eastern Europe, at the expense of the democratic movement, with the tragedy that had struck the Parisian proletariat a few months earlier: '[i]n Paris the mobile guard, in Vienna "Croats"—in both cases *lazzaroni*, lumpen proletariat hired and armed—were used against the working and thinking proletarians'.¹ The Slav nations that let themselves be enrolled by the Habsburg Empire were compared to the sub-proletariat, a class which mostly placed itself in the service of reaction, but might be won over to the revolutionary movement. In other words, the issue was not recognizing the right of every nation to self-determination in the abstract. That was incontestable. The problem consisted in the fact that, in a concrete, determinate situation, because of the initiative and political skill of the imperial power, the right of some nations to self-determination could come into conflict with the right of other nations and with the movement struggling against the *ancien régime* and absolutist monarchy, and for the realization of democracy at home and abroad. What is out of the question is the customary binary logic.

In February 1849, Engels believed he could theoretically master this complex situation by branding the 'counter-revolutionary' Slav peoples struggling against 'an alliance of revolutionary peoples' as 'small intercalated states', which 'have never had a history of their own'. The contingent character of the conflict was occasionally recognized: '[h]ow splendid it would be if the Croats, Pandours, and Cossacks formed the vanguard of European democracy'. Unfortunately, for this to transpire, it would be necessary to 'wait' a long time—too long. But it was a scenario that could not be excluded *a priori*. On other occasions, by contrast, Engels not only invoked 'the most determined use of terror' against aspirations to independence or secession on the part of such 'counter-revolutionary' peoples but seemed to definitively condemn them.²

The sometimes repugnant language should not lead us to lose sight of the theoretical and political problem confronting us, which Engels tackled in more mature fashion on other occasions. Let us start with an intervention from 1866. The International Working Men's Association, set up

two years earlier, demanded independence for Poland. But (objected by Proudhon's followers) this distracted attention from the social question and echoed themes from Napoleon III's propaganda. To further his expansionist plans, Napoleon likewise declared his support for the liberation struggles of oppressed 'nationalities'. Seeking to demarcate himself from Proudhon's national nihilism on the one hand, and pro-Bonapartist agitation on the other, Engels answered this objection by distinguishing between 'nations' and 'nationalities'. The independence struggle of nations such as Poland and Ireland must be supported. On the other hand, it had to be acknowledged that there was no nation in which different 'nationalities' or remnants of 'nationalities' were not present. One thinks of Alsatian Germans and the 'Celtic inhabitants of Brittany' in the case of France, and Francophone ethnic groups as regards Belgium and Switzerland. Hence, there was always some space for the destabilizing and partitioning manoeuvres with which tsarism and Bonapartism sought to further their expansionism and hegemonism.³ To counter them, Engels observed in an intervention of 1852, that a rule must be followed. The status of a nation could not be assigned to those groups that did not possess a language of their own and 'the very first conditions of national existence, numbers and compactness of territory'.⁴

The dichotomy between nations with a rich history and historyless 'small states' was now replaced by that between nations and nationalities. The picture is not much clearer as a consequence. But the theoretical and political crux emerges unequivocally: affirmation of the principle of self-determination does not necessarily entail support for the agitation of 'small states' or 'nationalities'. Engels' most questionable, or even utterly unacceptable, pages are precisely those that raise a problem of great contemporary relevance: there are countless separatist movements instrumentally encouraged or supported by great powers which are protagonists of national oppression on a large scale (see Chap. 7, Sect. 3). It may even turn out that recognizing a particular people's self-determination strengthens the main enemy of the liberation movement of oppressed peoples as a whole. We must not lose sight of the conflict of liberties that can arise. In other words, the mutilation of class struggles must be rejected. But that does not mean ignoring the problem whereby a historical situation (especially a major historical crisis) can require a ranking of class struggles.

Engels' error was that he sometimes resorted to formulations that involve a slippage—or convey the impression of slipping—from history into nature. The underlying inspiration is in little doubt. In 1848, to confirm

the decisive role of history, Engels compared Provence and Poland. With its culture and ‘beautiful language’, the former long played a vanguard role. But it ended up suffering ‘the total obliteration of its nationality’ and complete assimilation into France. Historically and socially, there was even an inversion: Provence became the focal point of ‘opposition to the progressive classes in the whole of France’ and ‘the backbone of the French counter-revolution’. The fate of Poland seemed to be the converse. For a very long time, it was the embodiment of the *ancien régime* and the oppression of an overwhelming mass of serfs by a small aristocracy. Now, however, developing the struggle against national oppression and undertaking a ‘democratic-agrarian revolution’, in which at least part of the nobility generously participated, Poland might be the revolutionary vanguard of the Slav peoples, all the more so in that it represented the quintessential antagonist of that bulwark of reaction, tsarist Russia.⁵

Russia itself was not frozen in time. In 1875, Engels referred optimistically to the social agitation spreading in that immense country:

The mass of the Russian people, the peasants, have gone on for centuries, from generation to generation, living their dull, unimaginative lives in a sort of ahistorical torpor [*geschichtslose Versumpfung*]; and the only changes that occurred to interrupt this desolate condition were isolated and fruitless uprisings and new waves of repression carried out by nobility and government. The Russian government itself put an end to this ahistorical existence [*Geschichtslosigkeit*] (in 1861) with the abolition of serfdom which could not be delayed any longer and the redemption of the *corvée*.... The very conditions themselves, therefore, which the Russian peasant is now obliged to face, force him into the movement....⁶

Having endured so long, the ‘ahistorical existence’ of the peasant masses and the great majority of the Russian population not only came to an end but was on the point of turning into its opposite. In the Preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels expressed the hope that revolution in Russia might represent ‘the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West’.⁷ This great country could play a vanguard role because active in it (observed Engels in a letter of 23 April 1885 to Vera Zasulich) was ‘a party which frankly and unreservedly accepts the great economic and historical theories evolved by Marx’.⁸ The bulwark of reaction was on the point of being transformed into a bulwark of revolution. The country long characterized by an ‘ahistorical existence’

was (to adopt an expression of Marx's) in the process of becoming a 'locomotive of history'.⁹ The ranking of class struggles, dictated in specific circumstances by an especially tangled skein of contradictions and conflicts of liberties, has nothing to do with a naturalistic ranking of nations.

2 THE EMANCIPATION OF SLAVES AND 'DESPOTIC GOVERNMENT'

The conflict of liberties was also brought out by the American Civil War. At the time of its outbreak, Marx invoked the arguments of the pro-southerners on both sides of the Atlantic: 'even if justice is on the side of the North, does it not remain a vain endeavour to want to subjugate eight million Anglo-Saxons by force!'¹⁰ And again: 'the Southern states have the same right to secede from the North as the United States had to separate from England'.¹¹ Here we have a fine example of binary logic! The focus is exclusively on the clash between the two sections of the white community, completely ignoring both the fate of African Americans and the foreign policy of the contending parties. Let us now attend to Marx's response. James Buchanan, the southerner who occupied the post of President of the USA before Lincoln, pursued a policy whose emblem was the export or 'armed spreading of slavery in Mexico, Central and South America'. Indeed, in these years the 'avowed aim' of Washington was the '[a]rmed spreading of slavery abroad'. And that is not all: Buchanan was determined to annex Cuba, possibly buying it from the Spanish or resorting to force of arms, but in any event without consulting the local population.¹² As regards the European supporters of the slaveholding Confederacy, 'it's truly marvellous how *The Times* (which backed all the anti-Irish Coercion Bills with such intense enthusiasm) is now lamenting that "liberty" will be lost should the North tyrannise over the South'.¹³ In other words, even if we ignore the fate of African Americans, Lincoln's American and European enemies were unable to raise the banner of self-government and self-determination with any credibility.

Those enemies advanced a final argument: 'the government [of the Union] has permitted no man to open his mouth for three months. ... The war has many opponents in the North, but they dare not speak. No less than two hundred newspapers have been suppressed or destroyed by the mob'.¹⁴ Once again we see the binary logic at work. With all other aspects of the conflict ignored and repressed, the political regimes in the

South and North are contrasted. The latter seems more illiberal, in as much as it was engaged in neutralizing those who propagandized for capitulation to the secessionists or, at least, for a compromise with them. In response, Marx noted that, long before the outbreak of the war, a climate of insane violence against abolitionists was prevalent, so that 'for thirty years' a leader like Wendell Phillips had not only to face the insults and threats of 'paid rowdies' but also to 'risk his life'.¹⁵ Hence, even if the focus was exclusively on the white community, the secessionists could not be regarded as the champions of liberty.

Obviously, the neglect of the fate of blacks, and the slavery inflicted on them, is glaring and arbitrary. Marx did not regard self-government or press freedom as 'formal' and 'abstract': he devoted significant pages to both causes. In a concrete, determinate situation, however, a choice may be required: permanent black slavery or partial, temporary restriction of the principles of self-government and press freedom? Both options are painful, but not to the same degree: the abolition of slavery is the pre-eminent, priority task. Hence, the decisive support for Lincoln, who suspended *habeas corpus* and introduced conscription, repressing resistance and revolts against this measure and regimenting the adult male population with an iron fist.

In fact, Marx and Engels urged the Union to demonstrate Jacobin willpower, to employ 'revolutionary methods' in the war against the pro-slavery secession.¹⁶ The condemnation of hesitancy was unequivocal: 'what cowardice on the part of the government and Congress! They shrink from conscription ... from everything that is urgently necessary'.¹⁷ Unfortunately, 'the party that is weary of war is growing', thereby hampering resolution of 'an issue as colossal as this'; 'signs of moral prostration are daily more in evidence and the inability to win grows daily greater. Where is the party whose victory and *avènement* would be synonymous with prosecuting the war *à outrance* and with every available means?'¹⁸ Overall, wrote Engels to Marx on 15 November 1862, the Union did not seem to wish to confront the 'great historical dilemma' facing it.¹⁹

Subsequently, judgement of Lincoln became more balanced, as he displayed unanticipated energy and, not coincidentally, was accused by opponents inclined to compromise with the South of employing Jacobin methods, imposing 'military government' and 'military commissions', and interpreting 'the word "law" as the will of the President' and *habeas corpus* as the 'power of the President to imprison whom he pleases, as long as he pleases'.²⁰ In the concrete conflict of liberties that had emerged, it was Lincoln who embodied the cause of freedom, not his opponents.

Marx was not the first to query the binary interpretation of social conflict and to raise the problem of the conflict of liberties. In the late eighteenth century, Adam Smith had observed that slavery could more readily be abolished under a 'despotic government' than a 'free government', whose representative bodies were exclusively reserved for white property-owners. There the condition of black slaves was desperate: 'every law is made by their masters, who will never pass anything prejudicial to themselves'. Hence, 'the freedom of the free was the cause of the great oppression of the slaves ... And as they are the most numerous part of mankind, no human person will wish for liberty in a country where this institution is established'.²¹ Hegel had argued in similar fashion as regards serfdom. To abolish it, 'the private rights' of the feudal lords must be 'despotically violated' and the 'liberty of the barons', which entailed the 'absolute serfdom' of the 'nation' and prevented 'the emancipation of the serfs', struck down.²² This is also the line of thinking in which to situate the argument of the *Communist Manifesto* when it demands 'despotic inroads on the rights of property', so as to put an end to the employer's 'despotism' over the wage slave.²³

To be precise, it is not a question of choosing between 'freedom' and 'despotism', as some of Smith's formulations would seem to have it, but of understanding the conflict of liberties. In the situation described by the great economist, the struggle for freedom took the form of a merciless struggle against slave-owners and the 'free' representative bodies monopolized by them.

3 THE CONFLICT OF LIBERTIES IN THE COLONIES

The condition of African Americans leads us to the more general theme of colonial peoples and peoples of colonial origin. The category that supplies this section with its title ('conflict of liberties') enables us to get our bearings in Marx and Engels' development and oscillations on this subject.

From the outset, Marx and Engels drew attention to the tragedy of countries invested by colonial expansion. Reference to 'the insurgent Negroes of Haiti' in *The German Ideology*, or the highlighting by *The Poverty of Philosophy* of the fact that British capitalism sacrificed the Indian people *en masse* on the altar of welfare or social peace for the metropolis, is not so important. More significant is another consideration. The key categories of the analysis of capitalism developed by the two thinkers involve reference to the colonial question. The masked, camouflaged slavery detected and denounced in the metropolis is explicitly contrasted

with the undisguised slavery imposed in the ‘New World’ (see Chap. 2, Sects. 1 and 3). Even when the discourse is more elliptical, it is clear that, in addition to the slavery of antiquity, ‘wage slavery’ refers directly to black, colonial slavery.

Colonial expansion was far from being the triumphal march of civilization and progress fantasized by the culture of the time. The pages devoted by Marx in the 1850s to the conquest of Asia are illuminating. Under the shock wave of ‘English steam and English free trade’, more than even that of the ‘British soldier’—i.e., direct military violence—the traditional ‘family communities ... based on domestic industry’ fell irremediably into crisis: ‘myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations’ were cast into ‘a sea of woes, [with] their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence’.²⁴ There was no doubt: ‘the devastating effects of British industry, when contemplated with regard to India, a country as vast as Europe, ... are palpable and confounding’.²⁵ What was witnessed in Asia was a fearful regression. In China too, ‘the population sank *en masse* into pauperism’.²⁶ What in our day has been called the ‘great divergence’ became still more starker.

The tragedy of the peoples invested by colonization went far beyond a deterioration in their material living conditions:

The misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intense kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before. ... England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of the melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history.²⁷

The picture of colonialism painted here is pitiless. However, statements that give us pause for thought are not wanting: ‘can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?’ Although driven by egotistical and even ignoble motives, in India, Britain the conqueror was undertaking ‘the greatest, and to speak the truth, the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia’.²⁸ Hence ‘India ... could not escape the fate of being conquered’.²⁹ In terms of the philosophy of history, British conquest and rule were accorded a certain legitimacy.

We can understand this in terms of the conflict of liberties. In the absence of a revolutionary subject, in a colony frozen in a caste order permanently dividing the inhabitants transversally, with a racial kind of rigidity that prevented the formation of a national consciousness and identity and, *a fortiori*, the idea of the unity of the human race, the only spur to alteration of an intolerable situation seemed to hail from without. While it crushed the principle of self-government and entailed grievous social and human costs, colonial rule objectively challenged the caste order and introduced the first elements of social mobility, laying the foundations for subsequent, more radical changes. In effect, the legitimation of Britain's role is partial and problematic: the 'bourgeois period of history', fostering (materially as well as spiritually) the world market and 'universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind' and the 'development of the productive powers of man', created the conditions for a 'great social revolution' set to yield a 'new world'.³⁰ If colonial rule was the negation of caste society from without, it had its justification in terms of the philosophy of history only in as much as it seeded the negation of the negation, with the supersession of the 'bourgeois period of history' (and colonial rule). What remains clear is Marx's preference for a different resolution of the conflict of liberties: a proletarian revolution in Britain or the development of a national liberation movement in India.³¹

Significantly, very different accents are to be heard in an article devoted to the other great Asian country, published in the *New York Daily Tribune* on 5 June 1857. In this instance, the celebration of the 'national war' waged by China against the 'piratical policy of the British Government' was clear and unconditional. To avert the mortal danger threatening 'Old China', its people were fighting with 'fanaticism', without respecting the rules. However, 'instead of moralizing on the horrible atrocities of the Chinese, as the chivalrous English press does, we had better recognize that this is a war *pro aris et focis*, a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality'.³² The British attempt to subjugate China was illegitimate. China could avoid the 'fate of being conquered' which, according to the analysis developed four years earlier, seemed inevitable for India. In China, the weight of a caste order was absent and this made possible the development of a formidable resistance and national liberation movement.

In the interim, a 'war of insurrection' had broken out in India too. The Sepoys had stained themselves with horrible crimes, but Britain had

responded with even worse crimes: ‘torture formed an organic institution of [British] financial policy’; ‘the violations of women, the spittings of children, the roastings of whole villages, were ... mere wanton sports’, recorded by ‘British officers themselves’, who arrogated ‘power of life and death’ to themselves and wielded it unsparingly.³³

By now, Marx had reached a general conclusion. The colonial power was indeed the more advanced country. But although it persisted, the conflict of liberties, when thought out anew or in the light of the new situation, no longer redounded to the benefit of Britain. The latter should be ‘forced by the general pressure of the civilized world to abandon the compulsory opium cultivation in India and the armed opium propaganda to China’.³⁴

The immediately ensuing years saw the development of the crisis that issued in the American Civil War. Marx’s research yielded results that threw new light on the history of colonialism. In its time, in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* Marx edited, an article by Engels had appeared on 15 February 1849 which interpreted the war recently launched by the USA against Mexico as follows. Thanks to ‘the bravery of the American volunteers’, ‘splendid California has been taken away from the lazy Mexicans, who could not do anything with it’. Exploiting the new, gigantic conquests, the ‘energetic Yankees’ gave new impetus to the production and circulation of wealth, to ‘world trade’, to the spread of ‘civilisation’. Objections of a moral or legal kind were peremptorily silenced by the article’s author. Certainly, what had defeated Mexico was an act of aggression, but it represented a ‘fact of world-historic significance’.³⁵ This was a crudely binary interpretation: it confined itself to comparing the different levels of development of the economy and the representative regime in Mexico and the USA, and concluded by celebrating the latter’s war as synonymous with the export of ‘civilization’ and anti-feudal revolution! What was ignored was the fact that slavery had been abolished in the vanquished country, but not the victorious one. Intoxicated by its military triumph, the latter hoisted the flag (manifestly colonialist in character) of the ‘manifest destiny’, the providential mission, impelling the USA to dominate or control the whole American continent. The studies undertaken by Marx on the eve of the American Civil War and during it revealed further details: the USA had reintroduced slavery into the Texas wrested from Mexico and the southern states of the USA aspired to build a kind of colonial slave empire in Central America.

Published shortly after the end of the Civil War, Volume One of *Capital* painted a memorable picture of the horrors of the West's 'primitive accumulation' and colonial expansion. It was an implicit, renewed appeal to the labour parties to reject the temptations of 'imperial socialism' once and for all.

4 INTERNATIONALISM AND ITS FORMS

Once the binary interpretation of conflict has been superseded, what of internationalism? Its significance is immediately apparent if we start from the hypothesis of an 'international counter-organization of labour' confronting a 'cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital'. If instead, we take account of the multiplicity of forms of class struggle and, in particular, of the national question, then the picture becomes complicated. It is much more difficult to foster internationalist solidarity within a front whose subjects are very different from one another: sometimes a single social class (the proletariat), at others a whole people struggling against 'the exploitation of one nation by another'.

How, then, should we interpret the slogan ('Workers of all countries, unite!'), with which the *Communist Manifesto* ends? Is it intended to evoke a binary type of conflict and a battle front that uniformly divides all countries in two, so that universally, and more or less exclusively, the same social classes—proletariat and bourgeoisie—are ranged against one another? This watchword also concludes the *Inaugural Address* (of the International Working Men's Association), which explicitly calls upon the workers of Britain (and the most advanced industrial countries) to support the 'national liberation' struggle of countries like Ireland and Poland. Not only this. The *Inaugural Address* solemnly states: '[i]t was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic'.³⁶ Proletarian internationalism can manifest itself in support for national liberation movements, which sometimes witness the participation of such a broad front as to include even the nobility (the case of Poland), and in a bourgeois government (that of Lincoln) engaged in repressing a pro-slavery secession by force of arms.

On the other hand, drying up a key source of the 'material wealth' and 'moral power' of the dominant classes in Britain, the 'Irish national

struggle' and the 'national emancipation of Ireland' were a crucial internationalist contribution to the 'social emancipation' of the British working class.³⁷ Like the class struggle, internationalism can take different forms on different occasions.

An 'internationalism' that ignored this diversity would be ingenuous or dangerous. On the eve of the 1848 revolution, Engels mocked Louis Blanc, who, forgetful of Napoleon's empire and its colonial and semi-colonial practices, liked to point to his people as the very embodiment of cosmopolitanism: 'the democrats of other nations ... will not be satisfied in the assertion, on the part of the French, that they are cosmopolites by the mere fact that they are French, an assertion which amounts to the demand urged upon all others to become Frenchmen'.³⁸ Not coincidentally, Blanc would later be branded an 'imperial democrat' posing as a revolutionary.³⁹ When it avoids the national question and the genuinely internationalist task of support for oppressed nations, putative cosmopolitanism or internationalism turns into an uncritical, fanatical chauvinism.

This was also Marx's view. Having mocked the 'moronic cynicism' exhibited by Proudhon over Poland's ambition to shake off the yoke of the Russian Empire, he dismissed as 'Proudhonised Stirnerianism' the thesis that 'any nationality and even nations' are '*préjugés surannés* (outdated prejudices). The source is a letter to Engels of 20 June 1866, which continues thus:

The English laughed heartily when I began my speech with the observation that our friend Lafargue, and others, who had abolished nationalities, has addressed us in 'French', i.e., in a language which 9/10 of the audience did not understand. I went on to suggest that by his denial of nationalities he seemed quite unconsciously to imply their absorption by the model French nation.⁴⁰

We are reminded of the irony with which, nearly twenty years earlier, Blanc's cosmopolitan and internationalist declarations had been treated by Engels. The latter went through a final process of maturation. In a text of 1866, he criticized French Enlightenment figures for having allowed themselves to be taken in by Catherine II and tsarism in general. In Poland, Russia elevated itself to protector of Orthodox Christians. The latter were mainly serfs and here was Russia not hesitating to raise the banner of social revolution alongside that of 'religious toleration'. It intervened in the country that was the object of its desires 'in the name of the right of revolution, arming the serfs against their lords'. Here was 'a fine specimen of a class-war' or 'war of class against class'.⁴¹ As we can see,

where it ignores or represses the national question, the most revolutionary and internationalist slogan, formulated by Marx himself in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (see Chap. 5, Sect. 3), can be turned into a tool legitimizing chauvinism and expansionism. Engels' analysis hits home. It is only to be added that Frederick II of Prussia adopted a similar posture to Catherine II. Addressing the *philosophes*, he justified his campaign against Poland as follows: 'the masters there practice the cruellest tyranny over the slaves'.⁴²

Analysis of Engels' development reveals an interesting fact: a sometimes crude theorist of the export of revolution subsequently became its most radical critic. In 1870, Engels identified the start of the bourgeois revolution in Prussia not from the arrival of Napoleon's troops, but the reform movement that developed in the wake of the national resistance struggle against Napoleon!⁴³ A reversal of positions occurred relative to *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*, written with Marx in their youth.

The late Engels thought deeply about the subject. Let us read the letter of 7 February 1882 to Kautsky: 'an international movement of the proletariat is possible only as between independent nations', just as 'international co-operation is possibly only among equals'.⁴⁴ This position was forcefully restated ten years later: 'a sincere collaboration of the European nations is possible only if each of these nations is fully autonomous in its own house'. Leading the struggle for national independence, 'Polish workers' also played an international role in as much as this laid the foundations for an otherwise impossible cooperation.⁴⁵ Indeed, Engels repeated two years before his death, '[w]ithout restoring autonomy and unity to each nation, it will be impossible to achieve the international union of the proletariat'.⁴⁶

The chauvinist danger did not derive from nations fighting tenaciously for their liberation: 'I am of the opinion that two nations in Europe are not only entitled but duty-bound to be national before they are international—Ireland and Poland. For the best way they can be international is by being well and truly national'.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, the chauvinist danger was represented by so-called 'republican internationalism' which, for example, assigned France, by virtue of its revolutionary glories, the 'mission [of] universal liberator'. On closer inspection, 'republican internationalism' proved to be fanatical 'French chauvinism'.⁴⁸ This is a general rule: when it ignores the national question, internationalism turns into its opposite. The repression of national particularities in the name of an abstract 'internationalism' facilitates things for a nation intent presenting itself as the embodiment of the universal; and this is precisely what chauvinism—in fact, the most fanatical chauvinism—consists in.

5 THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND 'IMPERIAL SOCIALISM'

Drawing attention to the national (and colonial) question was all the more urgent because colonialist ideology was in the process of making massive inroads into working-class parties, which proved increasingly incapable of expressing solidarity and support for colonial peoples engaged in class struggle against the 'exploitation of one nation by another'. In 1858, Engels not only bitterly noted that 'the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois', but added: '[i]n the case of a nation which exploits the entire world this is, of course, justified to some extent'.⁴⁹ Five years later, he went further: 'the English proletariat's revolutionary energy has all but completely evaporated and the English proletarian has declared himself in full agreement with the dominancy of the bourgeoisie'.⁵⁰

I have cited two letters to Marx, who reached the same conclusions. Far from being in solidarity with the Irish worker, he observed in 1870, the English worker 'feels himself to be a member of the ruling nation.... His attitude towards him is roughly that of poor whites to the niggers in the former slave states of the American Union'.⁵¹ Hence, we are dealing with an ideological involution entailing a slide not only into chauvinism but also racism.

Marx was right to condemn the fact that the British worker's inclination to view his Irish counterpart as a 'nigger' was 'kept artificially alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class'.⁵² This campaign succeeded in Britain as in the American Deep South, where (Marx observed) whites of modest means espoused the cause of the slave-owners and often formed the mass social base for attempts to export slavery to Central America. In any event, it was no longer possible to indulge in the illusion derived from the binary reading of conflict and the related credence in the immediate self-evidence of exploitation—an illusion entertained, in particular, by the young Engels—that the 'national prejudices' of the dominant classes were alien to the proletariat.

Very different from such early hopes was the picture that Engels himself drew in a letter of 12 September 1882 to Kautsky. The London government and dominant classes were inclined to co-opt the overseas white settlers: 'the countries occupied by European settlers, such as Canada, the Cape, Australia, will all become independent'. This would not apply

to territories inhabited by ‘natives’, who would continue to be oppressed and exploited. Unfortunately, this policy met with support from British ‘workers’, who ‘cheerfully go snacks in England’s monopoly of the world market and colonies’, and did not intend to challenge colonialism. Peoples of colour could expect aid only from a proletariat capable of resisting the lures of colonial expansion. What position should be concretely adopted?

India may, indeed very probably will, start a revolution and, since a proletariat that is effecting its own emancipation cannot wage a colonial war, it would have to be given its head, which would obviously entail a great deal of destruction, but after all that sort of thing is inseparable from any revolution. The same thing could also happen elsewhere, say in Algeria or Egypt, and would certainly suit *us* best.⁵³

Compared with the West, the colonies or ex-colonies were at a more backward level of development, were ‘semi-civilized’. But it would be senseless to seek to export civilization or revolution: ‘a victorious proletariat cannot forcibly confer any boon whatever on another country without undermining its own victory in the process. Which does not, of course, in any way preclude defensive wars of various kinds’.⁵⁴ This warning did not succeed in blocking the spread of ‘imperial socialism’ in the ranks of the working class. It was to the challenge represented by this serious mutilation of the class struggle that Lenin sought to respond.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004, Vol. 7, p. 505.
2. *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 366–7, 371, 378.
3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, pp. 153–8.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 71.
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 372–3.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. 24, p. 104.
7. *Ibid.*, Vol. 24, p. 426.
8. *Ibid.*, Vol. 47, p. 279.
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