

# Marx on Land as the Key to Revolution

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**H**ALF the world lives on an ideological diet of the Marxism popularised by malcontents who preach revolution. The central theme of their message is that industrial workers must overthrow their capitalist oppressors and turn to dialectical materialism, Master Marx's wisdom which promised an historical evolution into a higher social organisation: communism.

To be fair to the revolutionaries, the economic systems under which they—we—labour, *are* founded on injustice and their interpretation of Marx, based on his early, well-known writings, is not an unfaithful rendition of their guru's thoughts. The fact is, however, that after mature reflection on contemporary English industrial society, Marx ended up by rethinking the key elements in his model for change. For an insight into his perceptions we have to turn to his correspondence, which when fully documented will enable us to re-evaluate Marx in a dramatically different light.

Essentially, Marx came to appreciate the following points:

(1) Private property in land, not capital, was the foundation stone on which evil aspects of nineteenth century society rested;

(2) Overthrow of the landed aristocracy, not the capitalists, was the essential precondition of the liberation of the masses;

(3) The trigger for this change had to be pulled in Ireland, a peasant agrarian society, and not among the proletarian masses of the English factories;

(4) The solidarity of the workers, and the formation of their unique class-consciousness, was being inhibited not so much by capital as by the system of land ownership.

If all this is true, the whole edifice of the popular Marx collapses in favour of new insights and syntheses of the facts of history.

By the late 1860s Marx began to reflect on the importance of the land question in his letters to friends and fellow conspirators. "I have . . . been convinced from the first that the social revolution must begin *seriously* from the bottom, that is, from land ownership," he wrote in 1868. Certainly, in the communist manifesto, Marx had listed the nationalisation of land as a priority. But the almost total weight of his important writings was used to justify the belief that communism would come from the proletariat rising up against the capitalists who increasingly exploited them. For Marx, the burden of his-

torical change was from the beginning—and for a long time—on town, not country; on proletarian, not peasant (he viewed the latter with extreme distaste and condescension); on factory, not farm. His conversion to the importance of change in land ownership as a *causally important* factor was a later development.

In 1869 Marx wrote in a letter sent from London (all emphases are Marx's own): "*The prime condition of emancipation here—the overthrow of the English landed aristocracy—remains impossible because its position here cannot be stormed so long as it maintains its strongly entrenched outposts in Ireland.*"

In 1870 he revealed: "After occupying myself with the Irish question for many years I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers' movement all over the world) *cannot* be delivered in England but *only in Ireland.*"

Why was Ireland so important to the workers of the world? "Ireland is the bulwark of the *English landed aristocracy*. The exploitation of that country is not only one of the main sources of this aristocracy's material welfare; it is its greatest *moral* strength. It, in fact, represents the *Domination of England over Ireland*. Ireland is therefore the great means by which the English aristocracy maintains its *domination in England itself.*"

But Ireland provided the ruling classes in England with more than moral strength, according to Marx. Working class action in England—leading the world revolution towards the final goal: dictatorship of the proletariat—was "crippled" by strife with Irish immigrant labourers. And so, firmly, he concluded: "The English working class will *never accomplish anything* until it has got rid of Ireland." Marx was now (1869) convinced that his previous view, that specifically industrial conditions in a capitalist society would lead to the ascendancy of the English workers and *thus* result in the political emancipation of Ireland, was incorrect. "Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite."

It was vital to get rid of the Irish connection for a variety of reasons, thought Marx. The bourgeoisie was aligning itself with the aristocracy in the common exploitation of Irish land—which was a source of cheap food and wool and, through eviction of indigenous farmers, provided new and "secure" outlets for capital investment. Then there was the flow of rental incomes to absentee landowners, which gave

them financial strength while simultaneously sapping the strength and freedom of the Irish peasants. The latter, then, were compelled to migrate to English urban centres, seeking work and, in flooding the labour markets, depressing wages and the material and moral strength of English workers. Finally, the presence of Irish labourers in English manufacturing centres split the workers into two hostile camps when, in Marx's view, they ought to have been united against the common enemy, the employer.

And so Marx had no doubt what had to be done, if the forces of history were to be nudged along with a little help from his friends.

"England, being the metropolis of capital, the power which has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the present [1870] the most important country for the workers' revolution, and moreover the *only* country in which the material conditions for this revolution have developed up to a certain degree of maturity. Therefore to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Workingmen's Association. The sole means of hastening it is to make Ireland independent."

The urbanized proletariat, then, was apparently inhibited from acting out what was preordained by Marx's philosophy *until* the Irish peasants had taken up their sickles in anger! Hitherto, his hopes for revolution had been loaded on to the shoulders of the English proletariat. But now: ". . . the national emancipation of Ireland is . . . the first condition of their own social emancipation."

Why did he think the Irish peasants could do what the English proletariat could not achieve on their own—emancipation of the world's workers? And what was to be the chain of events leading to the final happy outcome?

The landed aristocracy, said Marx, was using religion to split the Irish tenant farmers into two camps: Catholics and Protestants. Divided, they were ruled. If the "Irish Church"—Protestantism—were undermined, this would result in the simultaneous loss of the economic base of the church: its lands. Unshackling the people from religious constraints, would unite them in a common cause. "You see," he told one friend, "the *English Established Church of Ireland*—or what they call here the *Irish Church*—is the religious bulwark of *English landlordism* in Ireland, and at the same time the outpost of the Established Church in England itself. (I am speaking here of the Established Church as a *landowner*.) The over-



throw of the Established Church in Ireland will mean its downfall in England and the two will be followed by the doom of landlordism—first in Ireland and then

in England."

Marx thought that the wedge of worker emancipation could be more easily driven in on Irish soil. As an independent state, its own legislator and ruler, Ireland could effect the "abolition of the landed aristocracy (to a large extent the *same persons* as the English landlords)," an achievement more easily realised there "because in Ireland it is not merely a simple economic question but at the same time a *national* question, since the landlords there are not, like those in England, the traditional dignitaries and representatives of the nation, but its mortally hated oppressors."

"If," wrote Marx, "the English army and police were to withdraw from Ireland tomorrow, you would at once have an agrarian revolution there. But the overthrow of the English aristocracy in Ireland involves as a necessary consequence its overthrow in England. And this would fulfil the preliminary condition for the proletarian revolution in England. The destruction of the English landed aristocracy in Ireland is an infinitely easier operation than in England itself, because in Ireland *the land question* has hitherto been the *exclusive form* of the social question, because it is a question of existence, of *life and death*, for the immense majority of the Irish people, and because it is at the same time inseparable from the *national question*."

And so Marx the revolutionary, the man who despite his determinism clearly thought it necessary to intervene in the forces of history, came to the inevitable conclusion: the need for workers to actively solve the Irish question. "Hence it is the task of the International everywhere to put the conflict between England and Ireland in the foreground, and everywhere to side openly with Ireland. And it is the special task of the Central Council in London to awaken a consciousness in the English workers that *for them the national emancipation of Ireland* is no question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but *the first condition of their own social emancipation . . .*"

Land rights, then, and not capital, were the fundamental element to which Marx drew the attention of his friends. We know from the manuscripts which were not published in his lifetime that he believed a transformation of rights to land would alter the relationship between labour and capital. In one essay, he wrote:

"The nationalisation of land will work a complete change in the relations between labour and capital . . ." <sup>(1)</sup>

This is consistent with his observations on the role of landed property in a capitalist society which he reported in the posthumously published Vol. III of *Das Kapital*.

Marx saw no complete identity of interests between the landed aristocracy and industrialists; he was aware that the latter had to fight to repeal the Corn Laws and institute the Reform Bill 1831. The fact

that many capital-owning employers used the system which they found—a labour pool rendered vulnerable by the system of private property in land—does not make the capitalist system *per se* evil. As Marx noted: “The *chevaliers d’industrie*, however, only succeeded in supplanting the *chevaliers* of the sword [the feudal lords] by making use of events of which they themselves were wholly innocent.”<sup>(2)</sup>

The monopoly-power of capital was derivative—arising from the unique land tenure system in existence—and not intrinsic (witness the problems which the owners of capital faced in hiring labour in colonies where there was land for all, a fact which did not escape Marx’s attention).

The evidence shows that Marx clearly perceived that the monopoly power and defects of nineteenth century society originated in the private ownership of land. Land, not capital, was the vital link in the chain of oppression.

Two final points. We must note that Marx was prescient about the Irish question. It *would* take the total freedom of Ireland from British domination to create the conditions for uniting the Protestant and Catholic working populations. The war for freedom which eventually broke out had partial success: the British influence, however, lingered on through Protestant landowning interests in Ulster. Today, Catholics plant bombs in Protestant homes; and Protestants fire bullets into the backs of Catholic women and children.

Secondly, we have to recognise that Marx’s later reflections on land tenure did not alter his preferences for a centrally controlled collectivist state dominated by the proletariat. But despite his contempt for bourgeois land taxation reformists, who proposed a fiscal solution rather than violence and physical appropriation of land, it was the latter—not Marx’s revolutionary proletariat—who finally broke the power of the landed aristocracy. A Liberal government, in 1910, took on the landlords who opposed the institution of a land tax—and won the constitutional battle. Unfortunately, the economic prospects for Britain were not much improved because the “land tax” in fact bore no relation to the one proposed by Henry George which inspired the radical wing of the Liberal movement. Ironically, it was a Socialist Chancellor who had a further try in 1931; his was a much better formulation, but again events intervened.

Today, while the landed aristocracy may not be our direct rulers, they—and the many who have since acquired ownership of land—still wield the power uniquely associated with monopoly control of land. But the revolutionaries who have inherited Marx’s more popular slogans are still blinkered in the belief that an attack on capital, rather than land, is the major priority.<sup>(3)</sup>

(1) The Nationalisation of the Land, in: *Marx and Engels, Selected Works*, Vol. 2, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973, p.200.

(2) *Capital*, Vol. 1, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974, p. 669.

(3) Extracts from Marx’s letters taken from correspondence in *Marx and Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question*, 1971, and *On Colonialism*, 1974.

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