

Marx and Internationalism

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July 1, 2000

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It is not uncommon within social science today to acknowledge that Karl Marx was one of the first analysts of globalization. But what is usually forgotten, even by those who make this acknowledgment, is that Marx was also one of the first strategists of working-class internationalism, designed to respond to capitalist globalization. The two major elements governing such internationalism, in his analysis, were the critique of international exploitation and the development of a working-class movement that was both national and international in its organization. A scrutiny of Marx's views at the time of the First International offers useful insights into the struggle to forge a new internationalism in our own day.

It has often been assumed that Marx believed that capitalism's colonial penetration of the global periphery operated as a purely progressive force, which would result in economic and social development in these countries along lines already pioneered by the countries at the center of the capitalist world system. There is no doubt that he concluded that social formations in certain parts of the world had taken on stagnant forms that blocked further development—one of the main implications of his concept of the "Asiatic mode of production." The external penetration of capitalism into such countries could therefore serve to break this stagnation and to provide the initial material prerequisites for a wider development. But, although this theme was repeatedly introduced in his early discussions of economic and social "backwardness," he did not thereby downplay the terrible history of capitalist exploitation of these societies or the necessity for social revolt by indigenous populations. Rather, Marx—with his usual dialectical imagination—not only condemned colonialism from the standpoint of those who suffered from it, but also drew on Hegel's "cunning of reason" to argue that such capitalist penetration was providing the bare material

preconditions, which, when coupled with social revolution, opened the way to historical advance—an advance which might take more complex and variegated forms, he seemed to suggest, than in Europe.

In his later years, from the days of the formation of the First International and the writing of *Capital* in the 1860s up to the end of his life, Marx was far less convinced that the Hegelian cunning of reason was operative here in any meaningful sense—that objective forces unleashed by colonialism were actually providing the material premises for development in colonized nations. Instead, he became increasingly concerned about the role of international exploitation in creating a permanent structural relation of dependency of poor nations on rich nations—and the effect of this on working-class internationalism. Ireland, he observed, was sending its surplus—derived largely from agricultural production—over to England, where it was used to expand industrial production. Moreover, by 1881 (in the third draft of his letter to Vera Zasulich), he had come to the conclusion with respect to India that “the suppression of communal land ownership was nothing but an act of English vandalism which drove the indigenous population backward rather than forward.” Although British imperial conquest in India had loosened the bonds of the old society, thus making rapid historical development possible, it also placed the Indian population in conditions of superexploitation. Thus, in a letter written in February 1881, Marx accounted for the situation in the greatest of Britain’s colonial possessions as follows:

In *India* serious complications, if not a general outbreak, is in store for the British government. What the English take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends for railway useless to the Hindoos, pensions for military and civil servicemen, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc., etc.—what they take from them *without any equivalent and quite apart* from what they appropriate to themselves annually *within India*, speaking only of the *value of the commodities* the Indians have *gratuitously* and annually to send over to England, it amounts to *more than the total sum of income of the 60 millions of agricultural and industrial labourers of India!* This is a bleeding process, with a vengeance! The famine years are pressing each other and *in dimensions* till now not yet suspected in Europe!

The recognition that such extreme forms of exploitation lay at the core of the international system under capitalism, became (in Marx’s more developed analysis) the first condition of genuine internationalism—an argument that he applied in particular to Ireland. “England today,” he stated in a January 1870 circular from the General Council of the International, “is seeing a repetition

of what happened on a gigantic scale in ancient Rome. A nation that enslaves another forges its own chains." Indeed, for English workers, he wrote in a letter in April of that same year, "the *national emancipation of Ireland* is no question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but *the first condition of their own social emancipation.*"

The second condition of internationalism is the need to combine national and international struggle—each as the basis for the other. The First International, the International Working Men's Association, in which Marx was to play the leading role, had its historical roots in England in the general strike of London workers in 1859 in response to the economic crisis of 1857–1858, and in the radical trade-unionism engendered during that period. But it emerged more importantly out of the effects of the great cotton famine brought about by the U.S. Civil War, which suddenly confronted the British textile industry—upon which industrialization was originally based—with a chronic shortage of supply, the worst hardships of which were to be passed down to the workers. Around 80 percent of the raw cotton imported at that time into Britain came from the United States, from which the British textile industry was now cut off due to the Northern blockade of Confederate shipping. Although some of the larger textile manufacturers had supplies of cotton stocked up in their warehouses, many of the smaller manufacturers did not, and the sudden decline in imports created a set of diminished expectations that drove the industry into further crisis. Full-time employment in the Lancashire cotton industry dropped from 533, 950 workers in November 1861 to 203, 200 in November 1862. It is due to this historical context—so crucial to the formation of the First International—that Marx declared in the Preface to *Capital*, volume 1, that "just as in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century the American Civil War did for the European working class."

The problem of proletarian organization, as conceived by European workers in the 1860s, was both a national and international one. What impressed Marx the most about the English working class in the early 1860s, leading up to the formation of the First International, was the fact that in public meeting after public meeting in 1862 and 1863, workers from Manchester to London organized in opposition to active British support for the slave South—helping to block the clearly marked intentions of Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister, to intervene militarily in the U.S. Civil War. This action on the part of the workers went against their own immediate economic interests and was, as Marx wrote to Engels on April 9, 1863, "an act almost without precedent"

in the history of the working class. Marx himself attended the mass meeting of the London Trades' Union Council in March 1863, in which the skilled workers of London proclaimed their support for the war against slavery and opposition to British intervention on the side of the Confederacy. This meeting was critical to the founding of the International. The First International thus arose not simply out of a national crisis but out of an historical act of international worker solidarity. (The population of the North in the United States, for their part, responded to this act of solidarity on the part of English working-class by sending shiploads of aid to the distressed workers of Lancashire.)

It is true that other, slightly later developments were to play more immediate roles in the founding of the International – which was influenced also by the efforts of European workers to offer support to Italian and Polish liberation struggles and was finally sparked by the threat on the part of capital to bring in foreign workers from France, Belgium, and Germany to act as strikebreakers in the war against British trade unionism. But Marx left no doubt that he considered the international solidarity demonstrated in the British working class' active support for the war against slavery to be the most important historical development leading to the formation of the International.

In his Inaugural Address to the First International in October 1864, Marx used these actions on the part of the English workers as an example of the need to establish an independent, working-class foreign policy that would counter the worldwide exploitative ends of capital:

If emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfill that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure? It 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 propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.

This showed, Marx contended, that history had already

taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counter them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the

relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations.

Proletarians of all countries, unite!

In the address that he drafted to Abraham Lincoln on behalf of the International only a month later, in November 1864, Marx eloquently praised the heroic stance taken by European workers in support of the North in the U.S. Civil War. The workers, he insisted, understood that “their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere they bore therefore patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the proslavery intervention importunities of their betters—and, from most parts of Europe, contributed their quota of blood to the good cause.” European workers provided their support not only to the slaves in the South but also to the workers of the North, who had realized that “they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor” as long as they went along with a system, corrupted by slavery, “which boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master.” It was the working people of the North, Marx argued, who were the real force insisting that “this barrier to progress” had to be “swept off by the red sea of civil war.”

The call for international proletarian unity was not simply a call for the working class of one country to support the revolutionary activities of another, but also had to do with the fact that the bourgeoisie, in its everyday economic relations, played one working class against another. The problem of importing foreign labor to undermine the struggles of workers was a key issue in the development of the International itself. Thus, the 1866 *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council* of the International drafted by Marx established as one of its main objectives: “to counter the intrigues of capitalists always ready, in cases of strikes and lockouts, to misuse the foreign workman as a tool against the native workman.” The working-class struggle could not be actively promoted, Marx insisted, if confined by national walls when faced with a capitalist system that expanded globally. Capital, he argued in *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 31, takes its surplus—often “the capitalized blood of children”—abroad and uses this to invest in other countries, where it can repeat the same exploitative process once again, often in even more intolerable forms. Under these circumstances, workers are forced to join in international struggle.

Yet, for all of his calls for international solidarity, Marx also stressed that it could only be built on the basis of national, working-class organization rooted in the material conditions of exploitation in given national contexts, and aimed at the state apparatuses of various nations. "It is altogether self-evident," he wrote in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875),

as a class and that its own country is the immediate arena of its struggle. So far its struggle is national, not in content, but, as *The Communist Manifesto* says, "in form." But the "framework of the present-day national state," e.g., the German empire, is itself in its turn economically "within the framework" of the world market, politically "within the framework" of the system of states. Every businessman knows that German trade is at the same time foreign trade, and the greatness of Herr Bismarck consists, to be sure, precisely in a kind of *international* policy.

If a working-class movement was to be organized, it therefore had to be initially national in form, aimed at its own national state and its own "immediate arena" of struggle. At the same time Marx insisted that these national struggles had to be organized—as were the bourgeoisie's own "free trade" efforts—into an international movement, representing the international activities of the working class. Criticizing the *Gotha Programme* (written by Ferdinand Lassale for the German Workers' Party), Marx complained that there was "not a word...*about the international functions* of the German working class!"

The international role of workers, Marx and Engels came to believe, also had to account for the struggles of peoples on the outskirts of the system. Capitalist relations penetrated these societies and generated forces of national resistance. For Engels, Chinese resistance at the time of the second Opium War, beginning in 1856, could be characterized as "a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality, with all its overbearing prejudice, stupidity, learned ignorance and pedantic barbarism if you like, but yet a popular war." Engels emphasized Abd el-Kader's courage in leading the Algerian national resistance against the French. The importance that Marx and Engels placed on socioeconomic development and their criticism of societies that they considered less civilized did not prevent them from appreciating the historical and cultural significance of national struggles of resistance. Revolts against racial oppression and colonialism, they clearly understood, were to grow in frequency and scale—and such revolts were integral to the world struggle, affecting the development of the working-class movement both nationally and internationally. "Labour in a white skin," Marx wrote in *Capital*, generalizing on the lessons of the U.S. Civil War,

“cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (*Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 10, section 7).

For Marx, then, national and international organization by workers formed a kind of dialectic. Neglect of either part of this struggle would be fatal to the whole. He was highly critical of action based on an abstract “universal brotherhood of peoples” (as in the *Gotha Programme*), which essentially repudiated internationalism by failing to give it concrete form, or refrained from connecting it explicitly to national struggles. The working-class movement had to emerge initially out of immediate material conditions, and thus to have a local habitation, but it also had to take on the same global dimensions as capitalism itself.

Hence, Marx rejected what could be called a cosmopolitan political stance in the sense of jumping immediately to the cause of universal humanity within all nations and neglecting the necessity of struggle on national terrains. As Solomon Frank Bloom wrote in the concluding paragraphs to his classic work, *The World of Nations: A Study of the National Implications in the Work of Karl Marx* (1941):

There are several kinds of internationalism. The character of Marx’s internationalism was defined by his acceptance of the existence of many diverse societies and by his emphasis on the intensive organization of the individual society. He was decidedly not a cosmopolite in his picture of a world order although there were many traces of cosmopolitanism in his thought. Cosmopolitanism seeks to pass from the individual to mankind without the intermediate stopping place of social units less comprehensive than the whole species....He was an internationalist, not only in the sense of advocating a system of cooperative world relations, but in the more specific sense of conceiving that system as the resultant or function of the friendly interaction of large nations which were organized harmoniously within.

Along with the too-small society, Marx rejected the vague and amorphous global society. He admitted considerable local variations, even within the same system of production. The socialist world of his imagination consisted of a limited number of advanced nations. His conception of world literature and world culture was a similar one. He reveled in linguistic variety and was at home with ancient and modern literature. He spoke of a world literature as already in the process of formation in the nineteenth century. It was the product of great nations which were developing distinctive, and yet related, literatures.

Socialist internationalism, as set out by Marx, was thus a form of egalitarian universalism that could only develop through national struggles and the

creation of multinational societies in which none would have any special privilege. It could not take the form of a “vague and amorphous global society” – the goal of capitalism itself. This society, in the words of Aijaz Ahmad (*MR*, July-August 1995), has no desire for “civilizations of universal and multinational equality,” but has as its aim only a widening orbit of exploitation. “To call cosmopolitan exploitation universal brotherhood,” Marx declared in his 1848 speech on free trade “is an idea that could only be engendered in the brain of the bourgeoisie. All the destructive phenomena which unlimited competition gives rise to within one country are reproduced in more gigantic proportions on the world market.”

A socialist internationalism that would counter this, Marx insisted, must start with the rejection of a system of capitalist globalization, in which the “metropolis of capital” (Marx’s term for the role that Britain had assumed in the nineteenth-century international system) is located in the rich countries at the center of the system and is able to supplement its own wealth-creation process by drawing on the surplus generated by the vast majority of the world’s populations living in the much poorer, largely agricultural periphery. There can be no genuine internationalism that does not have anti-imperialism at its heart.

In 1852, Marx wrote a letter to a friend in which he said that, “Both of us shall have had our heads chopped off or be shaky with age by the time it is possible to go from London to Calcutta in seven days. And Australia, and California, and the Pacific Ocean! The citizens of the new world will be unable to imagine how small our world was!” (quoted in Bloom, *The World of Nations*, p. 202). But, small as that world was, by focusing on capitalism’s globalizing tendencies in the nineteenth century, Marx was able not only to draw out many of the conditions governing that process, but also to lay out the conditions that would have to govern a socialist internationalism that alone could combat it effectively. In today’s world, at a more developed stage of capitalist globalization, these insights remain central.

In the more advanced imperialist order of the contemporary world, characterized by the concentration and centralization of capital on a world scale, the “bleeding process” and the “famine years” that Marx alluded to in his discussion of British rule in India have not disappeared, but exist in more heightened, more globalized forms than ever before. The terms of trade for non-oil primary commodity exports from underdeveloped countries, upon which most nations in the periphery still depend for their exports and foreign-exchange earnings, have been systematically depressed to the extent

that cumulative losses to underdeveloped countries amounted to some 290 billion dollars between 1980 and 1991. The losses to these countries in this regard—sixty billion dollars in 1991 alone—exceeded all multilateral aid to underdeveloped countries that year. Based on economic indices constructed by World Bank economists going back to 1900, “the general level of real commodity prices had fallen by 1986 below the nadir reached in 1932 during the Great Depression of the interwar era.”

Such conditions help to explain the worsening poverty and increasing indebtedness of most third-world countries. “According to the Food and Agriculture Organization,” the *Economist* recently reported (March 25, 2000), “830 million people in the world are underfed.” At the same time, world cereal stocks remain far in excess of world consumption every year—an ironic manifestation of the inequities of an imperialist world system that makes hundreds of millions of people “hungry for profit.”

Today, we are often told that these circumstances, though unfortunate, are a result of an unfolding process of globalization, which has nothing to do with the international exploitation of one nation by another. Rather, it is simply a human tragedy arising from original underdevelopment coupled with overpopulation and lack of rational, Western institutions of government. Those states that try to treat it as an economic problem to be addressed through controls on the movement of capital are told that they are kicking a gift horse—capital—in the mouth. Moreover, all such attempts by states to intervene in the market are seen as ultimately useless and even self-defeating. An important part of the ideology of globalization is that nation-states are no longer significant in the organization of economic relations, that they have been bypassed by global forces. State intervention in the global market, it is presumed, makes things worse rather than better—an argument that ignores the fact that states frequently intervene on behalf of capital itself.

Yet if states, as Marx taught, exist “‘within the framework’ of the world market,” they also exist, as he further insisted, “‘within the framework’ of a system of states.” This system of states is necessary in order to construct and maintain the capitalist world market and hence *cannot* be dispensed with if the world market is to function smoothly. The converse, however, is not true. The system of states *can* dispense with the exploitative framework of the world market system, insofar as class struggles from below serve to transform these states themselves. At no time, then, is the struggle over the state irrelevant to the larger global political-economic reality of imperialism.

Capitalist globalization, Marx's analysis suggested, was not an historical endpoint but an ongoing process of development that would almost surely lead to its own undoing, producing its own antithesis in the form of working-class internationalism. In the short period of capitalist triumphalism, in the final decade of the twentieth century, such views would have been summarily dismissed as insignificant. Yet, that period of triumphalism has now largely passed. Halfway through the first year of the new millennium, it is clear that a specter is haunting capitalist globalization: the specter of a new internationalism.

1. On the issue of the Asiatic mode of production, see Umberto Melotti, *Marx and the Third World* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
2. The switch in Marx's views on colonialism in the 1860s, toward an analysis that emphasized conditions of what later came to be called "the development of underdevelopment," has been heavily documented in previous analyses—though this is still often overlooked in the literature. See Horace B. Davis, *Nationalism and Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), pp. 59-73; Kenzo Mohri, "Marx and 'Underdevelopment,'" *Monthly Review*, vol. 30, no. 11 (April 1979), pp. 32-42, Suniti Kumar Ghosh, "Marx on India," *Monthly Review*, vol. 35, no. 8 (January 1984), pp. 39-53.
3. Karl Marx, *On the First International* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), p. 174.
4. T. Ellison, *The Cotton Trade of Great Britain* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), p. 95.
5. Henry Adams, as the son of the U.S. ambassador, reported on the historic 1863 meeting in St. James' Hall in London, which Marx also attended. Adams came to a similar conclusion as Marx, arguing that the British workers had taken a stance "almost without precedence in their history." On this crucial struggle in working-class history, see Philip Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).
6. See Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement: Years of the First International* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965); L.E. Mins, ed., *The Founding of the First International: A Documentary Record* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).
7. In praising the British workers for their heroic stance, Marx was in accord with the views of Lincoln himself, who had written to thank the workers of Manchester after they rallied in support of the Union cause in January 1863, immediately following the issuance of the

Emancipation Proclamation. As Lincoln stated in his letter of January 19, 1863: "I know and deeply deplore, the suffering which the workingmen at Manchester, and in all Europe, are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this Government, which was built upon the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on human slavery, was likely to obtain the favor of Europe. Through the action of our disloyal citizens, the workingmen of Europe have been subjected to severe trial, for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under these circumstances, I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country. It is indeed an energetic and reinspiring assurance of the inherent power of truth, and of the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity and freedom." Quoted in Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War*, p. 43.

8. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 124, 160; Melotti, *Marx and the Third World*, pp. 114-123; Davis, *Nationalism and Socialism*, pp. 63-65.
9. On Marx's treatment of Britain as the "metropolis of capital," see especially Marx, *On the First International*, p. 172; *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 30, note 7.
10. Alfred Maizels, "Commodity Market Trends and Instabilities," *UNCTAD Review* (1994), pp. 53-56.
11. For a systematic analysis, see Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel, eds., *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

Source:

Monthly Review, 2000, Volume 52, Issue 03 (July-August)

monthlyreview.org/2000/07/01/marx-and-Internationalism

