

Friedrich Engels and the Irish Lever

By

John Newsinger / Seán Byers

Friedrich Engels died on this day in 1895. We remember his engagement with the Irish question – and why he came to believe that, for workers in England to gain their freedom, "the lever must be applied in Ireland."

The scattered thoughts of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Ireland, collected in a 1971 volume introduced by the communist historian Desmond Greaves, have been pored over by generations of Marxist scholars and activists. Mainly journalistic pieces and private letters, they do not amount to a structured examination or theorisation of the Irish question, much less form part of a general theory of imperialism. But they exceed their commentary on any other national or colonial question, India included. Crucially, as "England's first colony," Ireland was the key site for their observations on the nature of colonial capitalist development.

It is possible to trace an evolution in Engels' views on Ireland and the Irish, from the crass racialism exhibited in his early writings to an altogether more sympathetic and sophisticated position. This progression closely reflected both the development of his and Marx's materialist understanding of history and an increasing fascination with Ireland and its people.

The impoverished upbringing and political radicalism of the Burns sisters, the daughters of Irish immigrants living and working in Manchester, endeared him to them – so much so that he formed a lengthy relationship with Mary Burns and, following her untimely death in 1863, lived with and married her younger sister Lizzie. Enamoured by Lizzie's "genuine Irish revolutionary blood" and "passionate feelings for her class," Engels' personal affinity with Ireland became a prism through which his later writings on the island were refracted.

Unlike Marx, who struggled financially for most of his life, Engels visited Ireland on three occasions, filling fifteen notebooks on the country's economy, culture, geography, politics and laws. He fell short of his aim to produce a general history but succeeded in influencing some of his lifelong friend and collaborator's most important works. Most notably, he informed by correspondence and in person the chapter of *Capital* on the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation in which Marx presented a materialist examination of Irish agriculture as an integral part in the development of English capitalism.

In retrospect, it is instructive to view Engels' first visit to Ireland in May 1856 as marking an 'Irish turn' in his and Marx's writings. Although they specified doubts about the immediate prospects for socialism, they both came to regard Ireland as the empire's "weakest point." As such, Irish independence and the defeat of landlordism became indispensable prerequisites for a workers' revolution in England. In turn, their confidence that these conditions would be realised grew and waned in line with the fortunes of the Fenians.

Chartism and Ireland

Friedrich Engels first encountered the 'Irish question' in the 1840s. His response was derived from the Chartists, the mass working-class movement that was challenging the British state at the time. The Chartists called for the repeal of the Act of Union, opposed the influence of Daniel O'Connell, not least because of his hostility to trade unionism and support for the Whigs at Westminster, and tried to win Irish immigrant workers over to their cause. The Chartists even supported challenges to O'Connell's power in Ireland.

This revival of the Chartist movement coincided with Engels' major study of *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, which features a detailed inspection of slum districts such as "Little Ireland... the most horrible spot." There he found a "race" of people who had "grown up almost without civilisation" and were now introducing their "rough, intemperate and improvident" ways and "brutal habits" to England's overpopulated cities. "Whenever a district is distinguished for especial filth and especial ruinousness," he argued, "the explorer may safely count upon meeting chiefly those Celtic faces which one recognises at the first glance as different from the Saxon physiognomy."

Irish immigration into England had, the young Engels argued, aggravated the hardship of English workers. But rather than this creating divisions within the working-class it had actually "deepened the chasm between workers and bourgeoisie, hastening the approaching crisis." The crude essentialism of his early writings accommodated an understanding of the Irish as a subject class and an appreciation of the resistance engendered by their deprived conditions under British rule.

Thus, for each denigration of the "dissolute, unsteady, drunken Irishman," there is a positive reference to "the mixing of the more facile, excitable, fiery Irish temperament with the stable, reasoning, persevering English [which] must, in the long run be productive only of good for both." Without the importation of this dynamic to the cities of England, "the English bourgeoisie would have kept its hold upon the English working-class much more firmly."

Elsewhere, he wrote that the Irish were "men who have nothing to lose, two-thirds of them not having a shirt on their backs, they are real proletarians and *sans culottes*... Give me two hundred thousand Irishmen and I could overthrow the entire British monarchy." However, most Irish immigrants – and domiciles – remained loyal to O'Connell, with bands of his supporters even trying to break up Chartist meetings in the north of England. Though he regarded the Repeal movement as "stale obsolete rubbish," Engels ultimately conceded that its key demands held popular appeal on both sides of the Irish Sea.

After O'Connell's death in May 1847 more radical forces began to emerge in Ireland, partly in response to the horrors of the Great Famine, partly in response to the developing revolutionary situation in Europe. In March 1848, the Chartists formed an alliance with the Irish Confederation, a radical breakaway from O'Connell's Repeal movement that increasingly looked to national revolution as the only way to end British rule in Ireland.

Given the limited class development and political consciousness of Irish workers, Engels hoped that the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor, himself an Irish immigrant, would be able to establish a strong Chartist movement in Ireland. He thought O'Connor's opposition to British repression in Ireland and support for Repeal would give him the leadership of the Irish masses, organised in "an Irish Chartist party."

In contrast to O'Connell, "that political juggler" O'Connor was showing the Irish people that they "must fight with all their might and in close association with the English working-classes and the Chartists in order to win the six points of the People's Charter." For Engels, then, as for Marx, Ireland's fate rested heavily on the successful execution of a British-born revolution, albeit one led by an Irishman.

Optimism was the order of the day. However, as Marx would lament, the European revolutions of 1848 "concluded with fire-balls, massacres on a grand scale and deportations". The Chartists, too, failed to live up to expectations, misfiring on 10 April 1848 with the failure of a London demonstration. Soon after, the British government proceeded to arrest those Irishmen most ready to ally with Chartism, notably the editor of the United Irishman newspaper, John Mitchel.

Arrested on May 13th and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation, Mitchel was immediately shipped out of the country to prevent any attempted rescue. He later escaped to the United States in 1853 where he put his flirtation with a Chartist alliance behind him, becoming a strong supporter of black slavery, advocating the introduction of slave plantations into an independent Ireland, and supporting the Confederacy in the American Civil War. He even rejoiced at the slaughter of Parisian workers and harboured a view of socialists as "worse than wild beasts." Viewed in this light, Mitchel's appropriation by Irish progressives is problematic, to say the least.

The best opportunity for an Irish rising was missed with Mitchel's deportation, but British repression and the state's mishandling of the Famine succeeded in provoking an outbreak in August 1848. In the event, the Young Irelander rebellion was put down without much difficulty. Mitchel was soon joined in Van Diemen's Land by William Smith O'Brien and Thomas Francis Meagher, while other leaders escaped to France. By this time Engels was, of course, on the Continent, taking an active part, gun in hand, in the revolutionary movement that was to bring down governments across Europe before itself going down to a bloody defeat.

The Irish Turn

The failure of the Irish movement in 1848 saw Engels' concern with Ireland fade, and several things combined to revive it. The first, as noted above, was his 1856 trip to Ireland and close observations of the socio-economic changes that had occurred during the intervening years. Secondly, an awakening of early anti-colonialism in 1850s India, involving major revolts in 1857 and 1858, prompted a reconsideration of the impact of British colonialism.

In their earlier Eurocentric vision, colonialism was assumed to play a regenerative, progressive role in India and other non-Western societies, driving them in a unilinear direction through the same developmental stages as Europe. But it was upon closer inspection that the horrors of colonialism and the full scale of its destruction became apparent, leading not only to indignation but embrace of the idea that national liberation movements in oppressed countries could aid the class struggle of the proletariat in the capitalist world.

These influences converged with the emergence of a new mass movement led, in the main, by veterans of 1848. Once again, this movement threatened to link up with a revived agitation among the English working-class. The new Irish revolutionary movement is generally known as the Fenian movement.

Among the things that shocked Engels during his tour of Ireland's west coast was the devastation caused by British colonial policy and the Famine. He informed Marx in a letter dated May 23rd, 1856:

The land is an utter desert which nobody wants. The country was completely ruined by the English wars of conquest from 1100 to 1850 (for in reality both the wars and the state of siege lasted as long as that). It has been established as a fact that most of the ruins were produced by destruction during the wars... How often have the Irish started out to achieve something, and every time they have been crushed, politically and industrially. By consistent oppression they have been artificially converted into an utterly impoverished nation and now, as everyone knows fulfil the function of supplying England, America, Australia, etc., with prostitutes, casual labourers, pimps, pickpockets, swindlers, beggars and other rabble.

This chimed with Marx's analysis, expressed at the time and later developed fully in *Capital*, of the systematic impoverishment of Ireland and subjugation of its economy to the needs of English capital. More specifically, the forced transfer of capital, labour and foodstuffs from Ireland was critical for the development of English capitalism.

The Famine, which "killed poor devils only," helped clear the land for the substitution of pasture farming for tillage whilst giving rise to the emigration that swelled the reserve army of labour in Britain. At the same time, the

resilience of semi-feudal social relations manifested itself in the continued direct appropriation of the peasantry's surplus by "rack-renting" landlords and a reviled class of native middlemen.

It was these unique conditions which gave birth to an Irish movement whose "distinguishing character," Marx claimed, was "socialist, lower-class," "republican" in the universalist sense of the term, and non-sectarian. And whereas he and Engels previously thought "it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy... 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. That is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general."

Engels and the Fenians

The initiative for renewing revolutionary organisation in Ireland came from 1848 exiles in the United States. Their envoy was James Stephens. Instinctively a man of the Left, he had fought on the barricades in Paris against Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in December 1851 (the Eighteenth Brumaire). In 1866 he was to actually join the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in New York, although Marx considered him "the most doubtful of our acquisitions" owing to his lack of theoretical grounding.

Nevertheless, on 17 March 1858, Stephens formally established a secret organisation, the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, soon to become the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Dublin. The new organisation began recruiting, establishing 'circles' throughout Ireland, in England and Scotland, and, most ominously for the British among Irish soldiers serving in the British Army.

At its greatest strength, the IRB had well over 50,000 members (Stephens claimed 84,000), as well as thousands more in the British Army. According to John Devoy, who was active in the recruitment of soldiers, there were 1,600 sworn members in the Dublin garrison alone. The movement was a serious threat to British rule in Ireland.

What of its social composition? Stephens insisted that the IRB was "wholly and unequivocally democratic," that it was an organisation of "the farmers' sons, the mechanics, the artisans, the labourers and small shopkeepers." A look at the background of the 1,100 men arrested for suspected membership between 1866 and 1868 bears this out: 520 of them were mechanics or artisans, 127 were labourers, 39 were shop assistants and 99 clerks or schoolteachers.

The IRB was a working-class organisation, dominated by skilled workers and characterised by its socially radical, democratic and secular programme. As such it was regarded as a dangerous threat not only by the British, but by the Irish middle class, both rural and urban, and the Catholic Church.

At the same time as the IRB was organising for revolution in Ireland, the labour movement in England was reviving. Here the revival took the form of a mass movement demanding the vote for working-class men, the Reform League, which included senior members of the First International among its leaders. A campaign of meetings and rallies culminated in a great national demonstration to London's Hyde Park on 23 July 1866.

On the day, the government closed the park. While many demonstrators went on to hold their meeting in Trafalgar Square, others tried to gain access to the park, tearing down the railings and using them as weapons with which to fight the police. One policeman later died from his wounds, and episodic clashes between the two groups continued until troops were deployed to restore order.

The IRB hoped for an alliance with these English radicals. Indeed, this sentiment was expressed most clearly in the Fenians' 1867 Proclamation of the Irish Republic:

Republicans of the entire world, our cause is your cause. Our enemy is your enemy. Let your hearts be with us. As for you, workmen of England, it is not only your hearts we wish, but your arms.

Remember the starvation and degradation brought to your firesides by the degradation of labour.
Remember the past, look well to the future, and avenge yourselves by giving liberty to your children
in the coming struggle for human freedom.

Thus when the Reform League called another great demonstration for May 6th, 1867, a clear and deliberate challenge to the government, the IRB offered its support. On 27 April, the *Commonwealth* newspaper, that was under the editorial control of the Reform League leadership, actually threatened the government with a Fenian-Reform League alliance: "what would become of the ruling powers if the English democracy were to shake hands with the democracy of Ireland... such a union has been more than hinted at".

The government banned the demonstration, but when the Reform League defied the ban and 150,000 working men and women marched through the streets of London, it was the government that backed down. Publicly humiliated, the Home Secretary Spencer Walpole resigned and the government proceeded to extend the franchise to skilled working men.

Meanwhile, the Fenian Rising in Ireland failed. The IRB had already been weakened by mass arrests, its supporters in the British Army had been rooted out, and instead of a guerrilla strategy it opted for open warfare. The rebels were dispersed by troops and the organisation was wrecked. And though its circles in England survived, the nature of its English campaign increasingly confounded Marx and Engels' early optimism that Fenianism offered a route to Irish independence and resolution of the land question.

One crucial episode was the rescue of two Fenian leaders, Thomas Kelly and Timothy Deasy, from a prison van in Manchester on September 17th 1867. The rescue was successful, but a police sergeant was killed. Following a police round up, twenty-eight men were charged with offences relating to the rescue and put on trial for their lives.

Engels' frustration with Fenian tactics continued to mount, but his harshest criticisms on this score he reserved for private correspondence with Marx and other contemporaries. This, and the likelihood that Kelly and Deasy were hidden in his home, underlines his sympathy for the Fenian cause and his fading hope that it would yet succeed.

Despite the efforts of individual members of the IWMA and the Reform League, twelve of the twenty-eight men brought to trial in Manchester were convicted, seven for riot and five for murder. The five convicted of murder were sentenced to hang, but soon after one of them was quite incredibly pardoned and released on the grounds that the evidence against him was completely unreliable and another had his sentence commuted.

A great campaign was launched to save the remaining three prisoners, William Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien. There were demonstrations and meetings, including on 18 November the occupation of the Home Office by some 70 working men protesting against the executions. But the government wanted its pound of flesh.

The three men were hanged in public on 23 November. None of them had fired the fatal shot and one of them never even took part in the rescue. Engels responded furiously: "So yesterday morning the Tories... accomplished the final act of separation between England and Ireland. The *only thing* that the Fenians still lacked were martyrs. They have been provided with these... To my knowledge, the only time that anybody has been executed in a similar manner in a civilised country was the case of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. The Fenians could not have wished for a better precedent."

Again, this sense of hopeful expectation co-existed with criticisms of the tactics pursued by the Fenian leaders, who Engels now considered to be "mostly asses and partly exploiters." The most damaging blow to the cause of English solidarity came on 13 December when an attempt was made at a prison rescue at Clerkenwell in London. The prison wall was blown up, but the explosion also demolished nearby housing, killing twelve people.

This was, as Marx put it, "a very stupid thing. The London masses, who have shown great sympathy for Ireland, will be made wild by it and drive into the arms of the government party." Engels agreed: "The stupid affair in Clerkenwell was obviously the work of a few specialised fanatics."

In the wake of Clerkenwell, Engels gradually detached himself from what he believed had descended into "a sort of Bakuninism." He was also left to rue his own failure to discern the evolution of the Land League into a movement for

constitutional reform, one that eclipsed Fenianism with appeals to tenant proprietorship and self-government. In an 1888 interview with the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, he conceded that:

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.

Consequently, without offering much by way of analysis or theoretical rationale, he converted to Parnellism and Home Rule as the most feasible medium-term solution. Irish independence and the overthrow was still among his foremost aims, but would in all likelihood be achieved over a longer transitional period rather than as a result of violent rupture.

Reflecting on the Fenian campaign while unwittingly anticipating the conditions that would accompany the Easter Rising, he summed up his position thus: “Though he grows noticeably weaker on the outskirts of the Empire, [England] can still easily suppress any Irish rebellion so close to home... *Without war or the threat of war from without, an Irish rebellion has not the slightest chance.*”

The Theoretical Perspective

Engels was charged with the theoretical work informing a political strategy for achieving Irish independence, and set about writing a book on the Irish question from “our standpoint.” Much of 1869 and early 1870 was devoted to researching the subject and he had completed the first chapter by the time first the Franco-Prussian War and then the Paris Commune intervened. The book was temporarily abandoned. With the destruction of the Commune, the subsequent collapse of the IWMA and defeat of English working-class radicalism, it was never to be completed.

A reading of this preparatory material for the ‘History of Ireland’ reveals that Engels brought very little theory to bear on his study of the island. In fact, it is a rather straightforward work of history and sociology, with aspects of political economy, and as such it bears a closer resemblance to *The Conditions of the Working-Class in England* than to any of his more abstract theoretical writings on France or his home country of Prussia.

Despite this, a theoretical perspective was not entirely absent from Engels’ thinking on Ireland. It is significant, perhaps, that he omitted Ireland and Poland, subject to the rule of the Russian Empire, from his strongly Hegelian definition of “non-historic” nations. Writing in 1849, he claimed that these were “nations which for centuries have been taken in tow by history against their will” and “must necessarily be counter-revolutionary.”

For him, the events of 1848 bore out his view that the southern Slavs were “Peoples which have never had a history of their own” and thus “are not viable and will never be able to achieve any kind of independence.” By contrast, though he did not say so directly, the Irish and Poles were distinct political communities, “historic nations” which had awakened that year and asserted their right to statehood.

The parallels between Ireland and Poland, and the empires they fell under, are scattered across Marx and Engels’ writings. Marx coined the term “Anglo-Russian slavery” to underline the similarities between the two empires’ treatment of the Irish and Polish, and praised the 1848 revolution in Poland and Young Ireland rebellion in the same terms:

The Cracow revolution has given a glorious example to the whole of Europe, by identifying the

national cause with the democratic cause and the emancipation of the oppressed class... It sees the confirmation of these principles in Ireland, where the narrowly nationalist party has gone to its grave with O'Connell, and where the new national party is above all reforming and democratic.

Although events were to confound their firm *expectation* that Ireland and Poland would achieve independence, the *principle* of Irish and Polish self-determination nonetheless remained a central part of their thinking, strategic and abstract. Thus Engels could write to Karl Kautsky in 1882:

I hold the view that the *two* nations in Europe have not only the right but even the duty to be nationalistic before they become internationalistic: the Irish and the Poles. They are most internationalistic when they are nationalistic.

Likewise, although he never endeavoured to produce a model or theory of nations or nationalism, his characterisation of the Home Rulers as a “compact national” party hints at consistency in his conception of “historic nation”: it was, despite its limitations, a movement seeking to organise the Irish people into a political community, under a semi-independent state.

Its instrumentalism aside, what is clearly missing from Engels’ abstract conception of ‘nation’ is a serious consideration of certain superstructural realities in Irish society. For instance, excepting his description of Ireland as “the *sacra insula*, whose aspirations must on no account be mixed up with the profane class struggles of the rest of the sinful world,” Engels paid little attention to the pervasive influence of sectarianism on Irish politics. It need not be said that this had obvious implications for the integrity of the envisioned Irish nation.

A related oversight was his failure to identify the emergence of a confident and successful industrial bourgeoisie in the north-east, along with a developed working-class. It would be unfair to criticise Engels for not discerning an Ulster Unionist ideology, for he would die ten years prior to the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC). However, a closer examination of the north-east would have revealed a disjuncture between the region and the conditions pertaining in the west of Ireland, for example.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, Engels along with Marx bequeathed to Lenin a corpus of texts that would assist him in dealing with anti-colonialism and claims to self-determination through the war period and into the 1920s, including, of course, the tumult occurring in Ireland between 1916 and 1923.

About the Author

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