

# OF SOCIALIST REVOLUTION : MARX'S REVISION

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Marxists as well as many others are familiar with the conditions required for a socialist revolution in the Marxian schema. A full development of capitalist economy dominating the society, polarization of the two opposing classes—minority ruling bourgeoisie and majority ruled proletariat engaged in class struggle, and a politically conscious organized proletariat etc, are among those essential conditions. Marx was so convinced of the essential nature of these pre-conditions that he repeatedly warned the proletariat and communists against a premature seizure of power before such pre-conditions were developed in the society.<sup>1</sup> On one such occasion Marx, deprecating the view that revolution results from an effort of will, asserted that revolution should be seen as the product of the realities of the situation and said, “Whereas we say to the workers: You have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to alter the situation and to train yourselves for the exercise of power We are devoted to a party which, most fortunately for it, cannot yet come to power”. He further asserted that under premature conditions “If the proletariat were to come to power the measures it would introduce would be petty-bourgeois and not directly proletarian. Our party can come to power only when the conditions allow it to put its own views into practice”.<sup>2</sup>

But even when the pre-conditions developed to certain state of maturity in England, Marx found that class struggle, instead of intensification, ebbed and retreated giving way to class collaboration. After deep study, he realized that those pre-conditions were not enough and the impediment created by imperialism ought to be removed first. Accordingly, Marx revised his theory. In 1869, Marx wrote to L Kugelmann,

“I have become more and more convinced—and the thing is to drum this conviction into the English working class—that they will never be able to do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, And this must be done not out of sympathy for Ireland, but as a demand based on the interest of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain bound to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because they will be forced to make a common front with them against Ireland. The primary condition for emancipation here—the overthrow of the English landed oligarchy it will be infinitely easier there than here to abolish the landed aristocracy (to a large extent the same persons as the English landlords) since in Ireland it is not just merely an economic question but also a national one, as the landlords there are not as they are in England, traditional dignitaries and representatives, but the mortally-hated oppressors of the nationality”.<sup>3</sup> To Engels, Marx later reiterated, “For a long time I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint. 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. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general".<sup>4</sup> Thereafter Marx again and again raised in the *International*, the question of independence of the Irish colony as pre-condition for social revolution in England. To Laura and Paul Lafargue he wrote,

"To accelerate the social development in Europe, you must push on the catastrophe of official England. To do so, you must attack her in Ireland. That is her weakest point. Ireland lost, the British 'Empire' is gone, and the class war in England, till now somnolent and chronic, will assume acute forms".<sup>5</sup> Later, Marx further explained in detail.

"After studying the Irish question for years I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the ruling classes in England (and this is decisive for the workers' movement all over the world) cannot be struck in *England* but only in *Ireland...*" Ireland is the bulwork of the English landed aristocracy. The exploitation of this country is not simply one of the main sources of their material wealth; it is their greatest moral power. They represent, in fact, the *domination of England over Ireland*. Ireland is, thus, the *grand moyen* (cardinal means—f.n. by ed) by which the English aristocracy maintains its domination in England itself... "But the overthrow of the English aristocracy in Ireland would entail, and would lead immediately to, its overthrow in England. This would bring about the prerequisites for the proletarian revolution in England. In Ireland, the land question has, so far, been the exclusive form of the social question; it is a question of existence, a question of life or death for the immense majority of the Irish people; at the same time, it is inseparable from the national question: because of this, the destruction of the English landed aristocracy is an infinitely easier operation in Ireland than in England itself—quite apart from the more passionate and more revolutionary character of the Irish than the English.

"As for the English *bourgeoisie*, it has, *d'abord* (in the first place—f.n. by ed), a common interest with the English aristocracy in turning Ireland into simple pastureland to provide meat and wool at the cheapest possible price for the English Market... (Moreover) Ireland is steadily supplying its surplus for the English labour market, and thus forcing down the wages and material and moral position of the English working class. "And most important of all! All industrial and commercial centers in England now have a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who forces down the standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker, he feels himself to be a member of the ruling nation and, therefore, makes himself a tool of his aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He harbours religious, social and national prejudices against him. His attitude towards him is roughly that of the poor whites to the niggers in the former slave states of the American Union. The Irishman sees in the English both the accomplice and the stupid tool of English rule in Ireland "This antagonism is *the secret of the English working class's impotence*, despite its organisation. It is the secret of the maintenance of power by the capitalist class. And the latter is fully aware of this. "England, as the metropolis of capital, as the power that has hitherto ruled the

world market, is for the present the most important country for the workers' revolution and, in addition the only country where the material conditions for this revolution have developed to a certain state of maturity. Thus, to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Working Men's Association. The sole means of doing so is to make Ireland independent. It is, therefore, the task of the **international** to bring the conflict between England and Ireland to the forefront everywhere, and to side with the Ireland publicly everywhere. The special task of the Central Council in London is to awaken the consciousness of the English working class that, for them, the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but the first condition of THEIR OWN SOCIAL EMANCIPATION".<sup>6</sup>

One should remember that Marx didn't stop at that. Campaigning against the atrocities committed by the British government on the Irish people and prisoners, he wrote articles wherever he could publish. A series of articles on the same subject by his daughter Jenny in a French paper created quite a stir. We mention these to point out that the opinion expressed in the long quotation above is not a casual remark but carries profound theoretical and programmatic implications impinging upon the Marxian theory of socialist revolution. Let us elaborate them one by one. Please read the words quoted from Marx once again and consider the following conclusions that we draw :

1. The first thing to notice here that Marx repeatedly admitted that he harboured quite erroneous ideas on the subject for a long time and was not at all embarrassed to move towards an opposite viewpoint after a long study on this all important subject of socialist revolution in Europe. He felt compelled to revise his own theory. We emphasise this point for the attention of those adherents of Leninist and hence communist culture, who believe that 'revisionism' in the world of scientific socialism is a sacrilege. Elsewhere we have shown that revision is an integral function of scientific practice; no revision, no science, it is fundamentalism.
2. Marx discovered the truth that in the real world various groups of proletariat were not united by the common bond of suffering but rather they were alienated from each other by contradiction and dissension on the bases of ethnicity, religion, racism, national chauvinism and selfish economic interests. So long a nation economically exploits another nation proletarian internationalism among their working classes remains a far cry. We in the post-Marxian age, however, are familiar with the ingrained and diehard racism being practised by the Euro-American proletariat till this day. The extent of their racism incorporating even their vagabonds may be a discovery to Marx but not to the colonial subjugated people. This is one of the principal reasons why the white Christian imperial proletariat could never attain the status of a revolutionary class-for-itself. Marx then came to realise that colonial surplus extorted by the imperial nation was not only instrumental for the accumulating classes in establishing their hegemony over their own proletariat but also the secret of that proletariat's impotence. In other words, the ruling classes, as a matter of deliberate policy, purchased the loyalty and cooperation of the proletariat with a portion of that surplus. As a result, class collaboration

replaced class struggle, as Marx lamented to the Lafargues. The finding that colonial surplus mitigates class struggle convinced Marx that his earlier theory of the mechanics of revolution based on capitalist development and class struggle missed the primary pre-condition and hence ineffective. The primary pre-condition, he now realised, ought to be the stoppage of the flow of colonial surplus and only then the class struggle would be restored and intensify to 'assume acute forms'.

3. In the earlier Marxian schema dealing with the pre-conditions, the vital role of the political economy of imperialism was neglected and totally ignored. The most essential element of imperialism is the incessant flow of capital from periphery to center, from the colony to the conqueror country. The neglect of the profound economic and political effects of colonial surplus on the imperial country was the basic flaw in the Marxian theorization relating to European revolutionary prospects. Marx's revised programme of socialist revolution now accorded primary role to this factor of colonial surplus creating insuperable impediment, thereby persuading him to realise that so long the empire was there, revolution would be nowhere. Hence his call to the *International* to accord primacy to national liberation movement in the colony so that it attained independence, flow of colonial surplus and its proletarian share stopped, hegemony of the ruling classes broke down, class struggle intensified and then (to repeat that cherished phrase) "the expropriators are expropriated". Marx also concluded that the loss of empire was the prerequisite not only for the socialist revolution in England but also in Europe as well as in the world; it was the first pre-condition for the emancipation of the English proletariat as well as for the social movement in general.

It is necessary to remind here that in 1847 Marx said, "the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie is at the same time the signal of liberation for all the oppressed nations".<sup>8</sup> In 1848 he declared in the *communist manifesto* that as a result of proletarian victory over the bourgeoisie in Europe "the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to".<sup>9</sup> But here in his revised programme Marx reversed the sequence and told emphatically that the end of exploitation of one nation by another i.e. colonial liberation must come first as the precondition for the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie in Europe.

In our estimation this revision was overdue. Had he not been pre-occupied with Eurocentrism in his study of political economy, Marx would have given due importance to his own recorded findings in respect of colossal and ceaseless accumulation of the English economy from external colonial sources, the major ones being plunder and slavery, the two virtual goldmines. Marx recorded the enormity of such accumulations rather clearly in his narrative but found no occasion to take it into consideration in his theorisation of English political economy. Had he done so it would have been revealed that the British economy was dependent on the colonial surplus for its progress, if not for survival. When he did take this into consideration just in connection with Ireland, the outcome was this revision of the programmatic priority in the revolutionary project itself. May be it was Engels' warning to Marx in 1858, "the fact that the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that the ultimate aim of this most bourgeois of all nations appears to be the possession, alongside

the bourgeoisie, of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat. In the case of a nation which exploits the entire world this is, of course, justified to some extent",<sup>10</sup> that set him rethinking his earlier view. To note in passing, Engels here not only admitted bourgeoisisation of the English proletariat but accepted it as justified, signifying that entry of colonial surplus into calculation altered the basic capitalistic character of the English economy. You simply cannot justify a 'bourgeois proletariat' in an economy named 'capitalist', can you? This is, in fact, what we have shown elsewhere concluding that the British economy had never been 'capitalist' but actually an imperialist one which, despite Lenin, has nothing to do with capitalism but is essentially constituted by a system of forcible extraction of surplus of other external economies or nations; as such imperialism has no relation with any particular mode of production, it can operate in as well as on any social formation, be it slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist.<sup>11</sup>

But to come back to our agenda. In the *International*, Marx's revision fell on deaf ears. Later, the leaders of the *Second International* spearheading the European communist movement, not only unceremoniously rejected the Marxian priority to colonial independence but turned imperialists themselves and earned the epithet 'social imperialist' from Lenin. Lenin himself, the leader of the *Third International*, acknowledged Marx's revision but he either failed to realise its significance or deliberately sidelined it as tactical measure. This is what he said, "the policy of Marx and Engels on the Irish question serves as a splendid example of the attitude the proletariat of the oppressor nation should adopt towards national movements, an example which has lost none of its immense practical importance" If the Irish and English proletariat had not accepted Marx's policy and had not made the secession of Ireland their slogan, this would have been the worst sort of opportunism, a neglect of their duties as democrats and socialists, and a concession to English reaction and the English bourgeoisie".<sup>12</sup> Though Lenin made such scathing criticism of the conduct of the proletariat of those two countries, when his own turn came Lenin conveniently forgot that Marx assigned duty not only to the proletariat but also to the *International*. When the question of according priority to colonial liberation movement in the programme of the *Third International* came up, its head, Lenin, actively prevented its adoption. Look at what happened when the pioneer Indian communist, M. N. Roy, at the second Congress of the Comintern, said in his first draft of a report on the National and Colonial Question :... the great European war and its results have shown clearly that the masses of the non-European subjected countries are inseparably connected with the proletarian movement in Europe, as a consequence of the centralized world capitalism.

"2. The fountainhead from which European capitalism draws its main strength is no longer to be found in the industrial countries of Europe, but in the colonial possessions and dependencies. Without the control of the extensive markets and the vast fields of exploitation in the colonies, the capitalist powers of Europe can not maintain their existence even for a short time. England, the stronghold of imperialism, has been suffering from overproduction since more than a century ago. But for the extensive colonial possessions acquired for selling her surplus products and as a source of raw materials for her ever growing industries, the

capitalist structure of England would have crushed under its own weight long ago. By enslaving the hundreds of millions of inhabitants of Asia and Africa, English imperialism succeeded so far in keeping the British proletariat under the domination of the bourgeoisie.

“3. Superprofit gained in the colonies is the mainstay of modern capitalism and so long it is not deprived of this source of superprofit, it will not be easy for the European working class to overthrow the capitalist order. By exploiting the masses in the colonies, European imperialism will be in a position to give concession after concession to the proletariat at home. It will not hesitate to go to the extent of sacrificing the entire surplus value in the home country so long as it continues in the position to gain its huge superprofits in the colonies.

“4. Without the breaking up of the colonial empire, the overthrow of the capitalist system in Europe does not appear possible. Consequently, the Communist International must establish relations with revolutionary forces that are working for the overthrow of imperialism in the countries subjected politically and economically”.<sup>13</sup>

Comparing Roy's thesis with what is quoted above from Marx it is clearly revealed that there is little difference between the two and Roy has rather elaborated Marx's revised thesis in detail taking the political economy of the entire European empire into consideration. While Marx had essentially the interest of European proletariat in his mind, Roy concentrated his attention to the interest of the colonial world, particularly India, in his theoretical exercise. We have continued to find similar difference in approach between the communists of the imperial countries and those of the colonial world ever since. Virtually echoing Marx's words, Roy said in the Congress, “the destiny of the revolutionary movement in Europe turns entirely on the progress of the revolution in the Orient. Without a triumph of the revolution in Oriental countries, the communist movement in the West might be reduced to naught”.<sup>14</sup> But Lenin would have none of it. What was unacceptable to him was the admission in Roy's report of the readiness of imperialism to, “sacrificing the entire surplus value in the home country”. No doubt that would be equivalent to a declaration that imperialism did not exploit the home proletariat, depriving thereby the latter of the *raison d'être* of its political movement. Lenin, therefore, could easily persuade the apprentice-communist M N Roy to amend his draft to remove the priority accorded to the colonial struggle and revert to the old orthodox Marxist line that the colonial journey to socialism would be led by the victorious advanced European proletariat.<sup>15</sup> Lenin's International thus rejected Marx's alternative pathway to European revolution. And that was that.

Frankly, Lenin was grossly inconsistent so much so that he could be held guilty of the very act of opportunism with which he had earlier accused the Irish and English proletariat. Consider what he said on this issue earlier on different occasions :

(a) Observing a social-imperialist tendency among the European communists of the Second International he said in 1907, “even the proletariat has been somewhat infected with the lust of conquest”.<sup>16</sup>

(b) Comparing the character of the imperial proletariat with that of the colonial labourers he said in 1916, “ Economically, the difference is that sections of the working class in the oppressor nations receive crumbs from the superprofits the bourgeoisie of these nations obtains by extra exploitation of the workers of the oppressed nations. Besides, economic statistics show that here a larger percentage rise to the labour aristocracy. That is a fact.

To a certain degree the workers of the oppressor nations are partners of their own bourgeoisie in plundering the workers (and the mass of the population) of the oppressed nations”,<sup>17</sup> (c) In the same year Lenin said, “Why does England’s monopoly explain the (temporary) victory of opportunism in England? Because monopoly yields superprofits i.e. a surplus of profits over and above the capitalist profits that are normal and customary all over the world. The capitalists can devote a part (and not a small one, at that!) of these superprofits to bribe their own workers, to create something like an alliance (recall the celebrated “alliances” described by the Webbs of English trade unions and employers) between the workers of the given nations and their capitalists against the other countries The bourgeoisie of an imperialist “Great” Power can economically bribe the upper strata of “its” workers by spending on this a hundred million or so francs a year, for its superprofits most likely amount to about a thousand million Now a “bourgeois labour party” is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries In all countries the bourgeoisie has already begotten, fostered and secured for itself “bourgeois labour parties” of social-chauvinists.... No one can seriously think it possible to organize the majority of the proletariat under capitalism”.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks of Lenin are eminently compatible with both Marx’s revisionist observations quoted above and Roy’s original thesis at the Comintern Congress. Even in that very Congress itself, the British communist Harry Quelch warned Lenin of the counterrevolutionary transformation of the British proletariat. In Lenin’s own words, “Comrade Quelch of the British Socialist Party spoke of this in our commission. He said that the rank-and-file British worker would consider it treasonable to help the enslaved nations in their uprising against British rule”.<sup>19</sup> Thus it is clear that Lenin ignored such warnings, rejected Marx’s revision, misled Roy and forgot his own earlier thesis that the European proletariat, in exchange of a substantial part of colonial surplus, turned counter-revolutionary and formed alliance with the imperialists to act as their partner in the imperialist project. Lenin instead, stuck to his patently improbable programme of according primacy to revolutionary agency of the European proletariat to emerge victorious on its own and then to liberate the colonies and guide them towards socialism bypassing the stage of capitalism.<sup>20</sup> For inexplicable reasons, Lenin was unusually dogmatic since it was he who did establish very clearly that the imperial proletariat abandoned class struggle and turned imperialist itself. We agree with Lenin when he holds it impossible “to organize the majority of the proletariat under capitalism”, because in our estimation the well-known capitalism in Europe was not at all ‘capitalism’ but was actually imperialism. Had it been capitalism, the question of impossibility of organizing the proletariat would have never arisen. When such an impossibility

becomes an observable fact one ought to make a review to ascertain once again whether the economy itself is capitalistic or not. But such unorthodox thought didn't appear to Lenin, because in those days none could dare raise a doubt over authenticity of the Marxian narrative, not to speak of a review. Our review revealed that the European economy was not capitalist but imperialist and that was why none of the Marxian predictions on European society did ever materialize in *real life*. Lenin himself had an entirely different, rather bizarre, idea about the political economy of imperialism and hence could not read the political significance of Marx's revision.

We can now only speculate what would have happened to the communist movement, had the Comintern then seriously taken up Roy's original proposal representing Marx's revision and promoted colonial liberation struggle to crush imperialism as the first pre-condition of European revolution. It will be an idle speculation though. But undeniably Marx's revision was so eminently based on visible fact, common sense and hard logic that it did find ready acceptance among the leaders of colonial liberation struggle that assembled at the Comintern Congress<sup>21</sup> and was sustained throughout till their independence. The presidential address of Netaji Subhas Bose in the Haripura Congress (1938) reveals such an instance : "The British empire is a phenomenon in politics", Bose said. "As Lenin has pointed out long ago, reaction in Great Britain is strengthened and fed by the enslavement of a number of nations. The British aristocracy and bourgeoisie exist primarily because there are colonies and dependencies to exploit. The emancipation of the latter will undoubtedly strike at the very existence of the capitalist ruling classes in Great Britain and precipitate the establishment of a socialist regime in that country. It should, therefore, be clear that a socialist order in Britain is impossible of achievement without the liquidation of colonialism and that we who are fighting for the political freedom of India and other enslaved countries of the British Empire are incidentally fighting for the economic emancipation of the British people as well".<sup>22</sup> To keep the record straight one ought to acknowledge that the dissident French Marxist Jean-Paul Sartre, while confessing and atoning for his country's sin of imperialism and racism in many of his articles, once concluded that the liberation of Algeria "and also that of France, can only be achieved through the shattering of colonisation".<sup>23</sup>

Now one may as well ask why the question of Marx's revision is raised at this late stage when Marxism itself appears to be quite out of fashion, if not out of politics. This is raised not merely to establish that revision is a respectable necessary scientific act that has so long been ostracized as an act of blasphemy by the fundamentalist culture inherent in the orthodox Marxist circle, but primarily to point out that Marx's revision of the revolutionary programme still bears a contemporary significance in today's neo-imperial world. In the present unipolar world, military and hence political hegemony commands and controls international trade and the rules of currency exchange. This is the secret of unequal exchange through which neo-imperial accumulation of neo-colonial surplus goes on. If a neo-colony wants to achieve independence or autonomy in the operation of its own economy, it will somehow have to find ways to cut off its

economic relation with the US imperialism, the first step towards resisting imperial hegemony and recovering sovereignty. This is, however, not the occasion to discuss the agenda of revolutionary struggle against neo-imperialism, but just to point out with historical strings that without ending the adverse economic relation of unequal exchange with neo-imperialism, the movement for emancipation of both colonial and imperial people will hardly succeed. □□□

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