

Marx and Engels and the National Question

There are two ways to look at Marx and Engels: as the creators of a brilliant, but in its deepest essence, thoroughly critical, scientific method; or as church fathers of some sort, the bronzed figures of a monument. Those who have the latter vision will not have found this study to their taste. We, however, prefer to see them as they were in reality.

—Roman Rosdolsky¹

I

Benedict Anderson, the author of one of the most suggestive theoretical examinations of modern nationalism of recent years, offered the judgement that for Marxism nationalism represents an ‘anomaly’, and has, as a consequence, been ‘largely elided, rather than confronted’, theoretically speaking.² This is evidently not intended to mean that the broader Marxist tradition—that movement incorporating not solely the theoretical explications of Marx and Engels themselves but also the practical experiences of subsequent generations of Marxists—has not concerned itself with the question of nationalism. Far from it, for the writings of Communists of such diverse outlooks as Kautsky and Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, Luxemburg and Bauer, are littered with endeavours to address the incidence of nationalism as both a theoretical question and as a practical difficulty as it presents itself to Marxist revolutionary politicians. The problem rather appears to be that there is no apparent direct lineage between the latter body of work and a ‘classical’ framework of Marxist theory—as there is (naturally after having made allowances for theoretical discrepancies of a partial nature and the necessary evolution and development of concepts), in relation, say, to the inner mechanisms of the capitalist economy, or to the historical origins and functional operation of the modern state. Further: upon examination, it is not clear whether there is within ‘classical’ Marxism itself even the elements of an essential notional framework upon which it is possible to develop, build and expand a coherent theoretical discourse; at first sight all we are able to discern are a series of fragmented and mutually contradictory references, apparently guided more by pragmatic considerations than by a framework of ‘scientific’ principles, and, after the passage of more than a century, ostensibly as of little use in the explanation of the modern world as is, say, the theory of ‘felicific calculus’ of Bentham.

Thus of the many lacunae evident in the corpus of ‘classical’ Marxism (by which here is meant that body of social and political theory as expounded by Marx and Engels themselves) the whole problematic related to nations and nationalism perhaps stands out as the most taxing. It is of note perhaps that Tom Nairn—one of the most prominent commentators on the phenomenon of modern nationalism to emerge from the British Marxist tradition—once remarked that its theory of nationalism represented Marxism’s ‘great

Note—In the notes below Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 47 volumes (London, 1975-) is abbreviated for convenience to *MECW*.

¹ *Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848* (?), 1986), 185.

² *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1983), 13.

historical failure.³ The reason that writers of the calibre of Nairn are able to offer this judgement, and an examination of whether or not they are right to do so, will form the bulk of what follows below.

II

The difficulties surrounding the reception of the phenomenon of modern nationalism by the founders of historical materialism are evident in even the most cursory examination of the basic texts. First, it is useful to take note of the celebrated references to the nation in the *Communist Manifesto*.⁴ In the substantive section of the text, noting that the Communists ‘have been [...] reproached for wanting to abolish the nation and nationalities’, Marx and Engels go on to assert that:

Workers have no nation of their own. We cannot take from them what they do not have. [...] National divisions and conflicts between peoples increasingly disappear with the development of the bourgeoisie, with free trade and the world market, with the uniform character of industrial production and the corresponding circumstances of modern life.⁵

The weight of evidence of subsequent history rather appears to discredit this statement: far from mitigating national divisions, the extended development of global capitalism in the century since these words were written would on the contrary seem to have intensified the political divisions between states and peoples along national lines; and, in addition, the twentieth century has certainly seen ever greater numbers of proletarians seemingly increasingly inclined to sacrifice their lives in wars fought against other proletarians for national ends. Nationalism, it would seem, contrary to the best intentions of the authors of the *Manifesto*, has continued to preponderate in the sphere of politics.

Yet in terms of how the authors of the ‘Manifesto’ seek to map out the necessary parameters for working class advance we encounter something of a paradox: for, in the ellipsis in the excerpt offered above, Marx and Engels argue—almost, it would seem, to the contrary of the rest of the passage—that:

Since the proletariat must first of all take political control, raise itself up to be the class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is still nationalistic, even if not at all in the bourgeois sense of the term.⁶

³ ‘The Modern Janus’, *New Left Review* 94 (November-December 1975), 3.

⁴ In what follows, I shall in the main be referring to ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, trans. by Terrell Carver, in Mark Cowling (ed.) *The Communist Manifesto: New Interpretations* (Edinburgh, 1998), 14-40. This most recent English translation is currently the most accurate and accessible available to us, and supersedes the celebrated (and Engels-approved) yet time-worn 1888 Samuel Moore version: ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, trans. by Samuel Moore, in *MECW*, vol. 6 (1976), 477-519; however, since the latter is likely to be the most familiar to the reader, and since the extant commentaries in English on the ‘Manifesto’ tend to refer to it, citations from the Carver ‘Manifesto’ will be accompanied in the footnotes by a corresponding reference to that of Moore. For a thoughtful discussion on the general question of the problems of translating the ‘Manifesto’ into (amongst other languages) English, see Terrell Carver, ‘Re-Translating the Manifesto: New Histories, New Ideas’, in Cowling, 51-62.

⁵ Cowling, 27; the Moore version gives us:

The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality.

The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. [...] National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. (*MECW* vol. 6, 502-03.)

⁶ Cowling, 27; Moore:

This message is repeated elsewhere in the ‘Manifesto’:

All previous movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the independent movement of the vast majority in the interests of the vast majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of present-day society, cannot lift itself up, cannot raise itself up, without the flinging into the air the whole superstructure of social strata which form the establishment.

The struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie is at the outset a national one in form, although not in content. Naturally, the proletariat of each country must finish off its own bourgeoisie.⁷

It is formulations of this kind that have been wrestled with by subsequent commentators—Marxist or otherwise—for generations: for while our first quotation seems to offer blandishments of at least an internationalist, if not actually nationally nihilistic, character, then the second set of references clearly seem to suggest that, to the contrary, the road to proletarian advance in fact lies along precisely nationally delimited lines: indeed, it is exactly to this end—to justify the notion that the proletariat’s advance to socialism is principally a national one—that this passage has been deployed. Thus, the right-revisionist German social-democrat Heinrich Cunow could write in 1921:

Today (1848) the worker has no country, he does not take part in the life of the nation, has no share in its material and spiritual wealth. But one of these days the workers will win political power and take a dominant position in state and nation and then, when so to speak they will have *constituted themselves the nation*, they will also be national and feel national [...].⁸

While along much the same lines is the later interpretation offered by Ronaldo Munck:

[W]orkers must become the ‘leading class’ [...] in a particular nation-state, so that they become ‘national’; but not in a bourgeois or chauvinist sense. Once in power the proletariat can work to diminish national antagonisms. [...] Workers of any country must ‘of course’ settle things with their own bourgeoisie (not international capitalism), which means that the form of the struggle is a national one; workers will achieve power only with a national strategy.⁹

And even Lenin—quite the opposite of a ‘national-chauvinist’—could draw out the following conclusion, writing in 1913:

Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word. (*MECW* vol. 6, 502-03.)

As Eric Hobsbawm has noted (*The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London and New York, 1998), 20n), the pivotal phrase ‘*sich zur nationalen Klasse erheben*’—very roughly, ‘raise itself to the national class’—suggests an Hegelian allusion which is difficult to convey in English.

⁷ Cowling, 22; Moore:

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum in our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.

Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first settle all matters with its own bourgeoisie. (*MECW* vol. 6, 495.)

⁸ Cited by Roman Rosdolsky, ‘The Workers and the Fatherland: A Note on a Passage in the “Communist Manifesto”’, *International* (London) 4.2 (Winter 1977), 15.

⁹ Ronaldo Munck, *The Difficult Dialogue: Marxism and Nationalism* (London 1986), 24.

The working class could not grow strong, become mature and take shape without ‘constituting itself the nation’, without being ‘national’ (‘though not in the bourgeois sense of the word’).¹⁰

Thus we can find a contradictory and conflicting message in the ‘Manifesto’: the clear and obvious question, which remains unanswered, is sharply put by Rosdolsky: ‘In what sense do the workers have “no country”, and how is it that, nonetheless, even after acquiring supremacy, they will still remain “so far, national”?’¹¹

III

This is, however, not the limit to the difficulties surrounding the nation and nationalism in the work of Marx and Engels: there is another aspect, even more troubling—and, given the experiences of national terror of the twentieth century, even at first sight a little sinister. For during the revolutions of 1848-49—in which both Marx and Engels played an active role—and in particular in the pages of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Engels developed an analysis of the then active national liberation movements of Central and Eastern Europe which was founded upon the concept of ‘nonhistoric’ peoples: in other words, that there were, on the one hand, ‘great historic nations’—Germany, Poland, Hungary, Italy—that had won the ‘right’, through their previous struggles for independence and unity to constitute themselves as viable nation-states, while on the other there were smaller, less dynamic nationalities (peoples ‘without history’)—the Slavs of Austria and Hungary, the Hungarian and Austrian Romanians—unable to establish themselves as national states and whose struggles were thus undeserving of support.

There is no country in Europe which does not have in some corner or other one of several ruined fragments of peoples, the remnant of a former population that was suppressed and held in bondage by the nation which later became the main vehicle of historical development. The relics of a nation mercilessly trampled under foot in the course of history, as Hegel says, these *residual fragments of peoples* always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution and remain so until their complete extirpation or loss of their national character, just as their whole existence in general is itself a protest against a great historical revolution.

Such, in Scotland, are the Gaels, the supporters of the Stuarts from 1640 to 1745.

Such, in France, are the Bretons, the supporters of the Bourbons from 1792 to 1800.

Such, in Spain, are the Basques, the supporters of Don Carlos.

Such, in Austria, are the pan-Slavist *Southern Slavs*, who are nothing but the residual fragment of peoples [...]. That this residual fragment [...] sees its salvation only in a reversal of the whole European movement, which in its view ought not to go from west to east, but from east to west, and that for it the instrument of liberation and the bond of unity is the *Russian knout*—that is the most natural thing in the world.¹²

This was no mere pragmatic or practical judgement on Engels’ part—although the practical considerations of the inter-state and national power politics of the mid-nineteenth century, especially

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, ‘Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism’, *Collected Works* vol. 21 (Moscow, 1964), 73.

¹¹ ‘The Workers and the Fatherland’, 16.

¹² Friedrich Engels, ‘The Magyar Struggle’, *MECW* vol. 8 (1977), 234-35.

those relating to absolutist Russia, perceived as the back-bone of European reaction, manifestly played their part—but was elevated to the level of a general *theory* of nationality.¹³ Thus:

Peoples which have never had a history of their own, which from the time when they achieved the first, most elementary stage of civilisation already came under foreign sway, or which were forced to attain the first stage of civilisation only by a foreign yoke, are not viable and will never be able to achieve any kind of independence.¹⁴

Of course, the whole notion of ‘history-less’ peoples has a strong Hegelian connotation, as Engels, as we can see, was aware. Since central in Hegel’s schema of history was what he called the ‘dialectic of [...] national minds’ on the goal to the ‘realisation of the mind’,¹⁵ he had written to the effect that it was only those nations that had sufficient spiritual strength and will practically to establish developed political systems—that is, states—that were capable both of bearing the weight of historical progress and of driving it forwards. Thus:

In the existence of a *nation* the substantial aim is to be a state and preserve itself as such. A nation with no state formation (a *mere nation*), has strictly speaking, no history—like the nations which existed before the rise of states and others which still exist in a condition of savagery. What happens to a nation, and takes place within it, has as its essential significance in relation to the state [...].¹⁶

For Hegel, what lay behind this view was the sharp distinction he drew between ‘nation’ and ‘state’: while a ‘people’ may exist as a ‘nation’, they are unable to contribute to the unfolding of history without constituting themselves as a state. Now, this is no the place to develop an exegesis of Hegel’s theories of historical development; what is sufficient to note here are the striking similarities in structure between Engels’s conceptions and those of Hegel: it is almost, I would suggest, that, in the absence of a defined theoretical framework of his own with which to work, Engels—consciously or otherwise—borrowed the metaphysical Hegelian notion of the function of the nation-state in history virtually wholesale: discarding the ‘rational kernel’ and retaining the ‘mystical shell’, as it were. This time, we can agree with the judgement of Ronaldo Munck, when he suggests that what is fundamental (and most problematical) with regard to Engels’s positions is not the primacy of pragmatic considerations, or any charges of inconsistency—for, as we have seen, Engels precisely sought to systematise his thinking around a single theory—but rather how he could ‘have such an unstable point of reference from which to draw conclusions’¹⁷ (that of Hegel) with regard to the relation between national states and emancipatory movements and historical development in general.

¹³ It is curious that Charles C. Herod, in his *The Nation in the History of Marxian Thought: The Concept of Nations With History and Nations Without History* (The Hague, 1976), 30, should attribute an excerpt from the English version of Engels’s ‘Germany and Pan-Slavism’ (first published in the *New York Daily Tribune* of 1855)—which characterises one part of the Austrian Slavs as a ‘remnant’ of a people—to Marx: in fact, the writings of ‘Marx-and-Engels’ on the national movements of Central and Eastern Europe which deploy the concept of ‘peoples without history’ are exclusively the work of Engels. That Marx endorsed Engels’s position is without doubt; but to attribute the work of one of the founders of historical materialism to the other is an example of sloppy scholarship, if not of something even more sinister again. For a far more satisfying analysis of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* material on the national movements in the revolutions of 1848-9, see Rosdolsky’s *Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples*, a work which Perry Anderson has quite justifiably acclaimed as ‘one of the few significant Marxist texts on the national question since the time of Lenin.’ (*Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976), 99.)

¹⁴ Friedrich Engels, ‘Democratic Pan-Slavism’, *MECW* vol. 8 (1977), 367.

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, (Oxford, 1894), 147

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁷ Munck, *The Difficult Dialogue*, 22. ‘That the founders of Marxism had to borrow their theories directly from Hegel to explain nationalism is proof in itself of their backwardness on this topic’ (*ibid.*, 13).

Thus alongside the contradictory messages to be found in the ‘Manifesto’, we also have to accommodate both the uncomfortable views of Engels with regard to ‘peoples without history’, and the metaphysical theoretical framework in which his analysis was situated.

IV

Yet this is not the end of our story: in the aftermath of the revolutionary conjuncture of 1848-9, and particularly from the late 1850s, both Marx and Engels began—empirically at least—to show a greater sensitivity to actually existing national movements, a shift most dramatically evident around the question of Ireland. From this point, we begin to see a conception of the national question—particularly, but not exclusively, in Marx—as not simply a question related to socio-economic development, but one increasingly related to politics. Thus, writing on the Irish question in 1867, Marx felt able to express the following judgement:

I once believed that the separation of Ireland from England to be impossible. I now regard it as inevitable, although *federation* may follow upon separation.¹⁸

This understanding was not motivated solely by a concern for freedom in Ireland: far from it, for what Marx was moving towards was an understanding of the political impact of colonialism on the working class in the oppressor nation. Irish emancipation was as necessary for the British working class movement as it was for Ireland:

I have become more and more convinced—and the thing now is to drum this conviction into the English [sic] 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 not only make a common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union [...] and substituting a federal relationship for it. And this must be done not out of sympathy for Ireland, but as a demand based on the interests of the English proletariat.¹⁹

Marx was fully aware that this aspect of the national question was, in fact an eminently practical question for the working class movement:

All industrial and commercial centres 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*. [...] The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker 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 power by the capitalist class.²⁰

Marx’s writings on Ireland from this period mark a real turning point in the outlook of both he and Engels in relation to the political significance of nationalism, yet they do not form as yet a clear and distinctive theory of nationalism; the latter remains for our purposes in abeyance. In addition, as we shall see, the writings on Ireland do not mark the only movement or tension in Marx’s thinking over this

¹⁸ ‘Marx to Engels’ (2 November, 1867), *MECW* vol. 42 (1987), 460.

¹⁹ ‘Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann’ (29 November, 1869), *MECW* vol. 43 (1988), 390.

²⁰ ‘Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt’ (9 April, 1870), *MECW* vol. 43 (1988), 474-75.

period, although they do, as I hope to show, indicate the general direction in which Marx was moving in the last two decades of his life.

V

In order to account for the vicissitudes of perspective in Marx and Engels's thinking on the nation and nationalism, then, we can begin by agreeing with Eric Hobsbawm that, for Marx and Engels, the national question was not an end in itself, but was to be understood only 'in relation to the process, interests and strategies of world revolution';²¹ and that, as a consequence, overall pragmatic and practical concerns played a significant role in determining their attitude to the various national movements with which they were confronted. But there is a more substantive problematic underlying this whole question: for, evident particularly in Marx, there is to be found a tension within 'classical' Marxism between two counterposed models of broad historical development, a tension that Marx—in my view inevitably so given the socio-historical period in which he lived and worked—proved unable definitively to resolve. It is here that we are able to locate the essential elements which determined the contradictory outlook of 'classical' Marxism toward nationalism.

For if it is suggested that what was cardinal for Marx and Engels was the 'process, interests and strategy of the world revolution', then it is equally the case that in Marx we find more than one conception—often co-existent in single texts—of what the parameters of this process may actually be. On the one hand, we have a model of historical development that we can, for want of a better description, dub 'linear-evolutionist'; that model that is most succinctly encapsulated in the Preface to *Capital*, when Marx observed that 'the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.'²² In other words, each nation is fated by history to traverse the same developmental path, independently of one another. Absent from this model is any conception—evident in the later work of Lenin and Trotsky—of what has come to be known as 'uneven' (or 'combined and uneven') development. This perspective of Marx's is at a piece with what approaches an almost 'Darwinist' approach to the fate of nations, in which the structure of national development is one involving a struggle for survival of the 'fittest' peoples, with the 'losers'—peoples 'without history'—condemned to historical oblivion. This certainly seems to be the model guiding Engels's more developed theoretical excursions into the arena of national politics (along with the powerful echo of Hegel): the duty of the 'nonhistoric' peoples is to submit to the inevitable historical tide and abandon their national aspirations, while the source of historical progress is to be found in those nations exhibiting the highest degree of social and economic development.

Thus Marx in 1847 could note that (and compare this approach with his more mature position on Ireland above):

Of all countries, England is the one where the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is the most highly developed. The victory of the English proletarians over the English bourgeoisie is, therefore, decisive for the victory of all the oppressed over their oppressors. Hence Poland must be liberated not in Poland but in England. So you Chartists must not simply express

²¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Marx, Engels and Politics', in E. J. Hobsbawm (ed.) *The History of Marxism: Volume One: Marxism in Marx's Day* (Brighton: , 1982), 249.

²² Karl Marx, 'Preface to the First German Edition' of *Capital*, volume 1, *MECW* vol. 35 (1996), 9.

pious wishes for the liberation of nations. Defeat your own internal enemies and you will then be able to pride yourselves on having defeated the entire old society.²³

The clear echo here is with the passage concerning the nation in the ‘Communist Manifesto’ that we encountered earlier; that, as the development of capitalism itself assists the mitigation of national divisions,

The rule of the proletariat will make [national divisions and conflicts between peoples] [...] disappear even faster. United action, at least in the civilised countries, is one of the first conditions for freeing the proletariat.

To the degree that the exploitation of one individual by another is transformed, so will the exploitation of one nation by another.²⁴

In this linear and evolutionist (some would say ‘non-dialectical’²⁵) view, even though the oppression of one nation (or nationality) by another is to be opposed, the role of movements for national independence is relegated to a subordinate position in the overall movement towards socialism: it is even implied as a possibility that a ‘backward’ people may be beneficially ‘civilised’ by a more developed nation exercising political or even economic control over its fate.²⁶

Yet even in the *Manifesto* itself we can also find a parallel analysis incorporating a far more sophisticated account of the relation between capitalist development and the evolution of national differences. In its opening section, describing the world-wide rise of the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels present the following account:

The need for a constantly expanding outlet for their products pursues the bourgeoisie over the whole world. It must get a foothold everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

Through the exploitation of the world market the bourgeoisie has made the production and consumption of all countries cosmopolitan. It has pulled the national basis of industry right out from under the reactionaries, to their consternation. Long-established national industries have been destroyed and are still being destroyed daily. They are being displaced by new industries—the introduction of which becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations—industries that no longer work up indigenous raw materials but use raw materials from the ends of the earth,

²³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ‘On Poland: Speeches at the International Meeting Held in London on November 29, 1847 to Mark the 17th Anniversary of the Polish Uprising of 1830’ (Marx’s Speech), *MECW* vol. 6 (1976) 389.

²⁴ Cowling, 27; Moore:

The supremacy of the proletariat will cause [national differences and antagonisms between peoples] [...] to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilised countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. (*MECW* vol. 6, 502-03.)

²⁵ See, for example, Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London, 1981), especially 30-32.

²⁶ Thus Engels on Mexico:

How did it happen that over Texas a war broke out between [Mexico and the United States] [...], which, according to the moral theory, ought to have been ‘fraternally united’ and ‘federated’, and that, owing to ‘geographical, commercial and strategic necessities’, the ‘sovereign will’ of the American [sic] people, supported by the bravery of the American volunteers, shifted the borders drawn by nature some hundreds of miles south. And will Bakunin accuse the Americans of a ‘war of conquest’, which, although it deals a severe blow to his theory based on ‘justice and humanity’, was nevertheless waged wholly and solely in the interest of civilisation? [...] The ‘independence’ of a few Spanish Californians and Texans may suffer because of it, in some places ‘justice’ and other moral principles may be violated; but what does that matter compared to facts of world-historic significance? (‘Democratic Pan-Slavism’, 365-66.)

industries whose products are consumed not only in the country of origin home but in every part of the world. In place of the old needs satisfied by home production, we have new ones which demand the products of the most distant lands and climes for their satisfaction. In place of the old local and national self-sufficiency and isolation we have *a universal commerce, a universal dependence of nations on one another.*²⁷

Thus here, rather than a model which posits the independent evolution of separate nations along the same path, separated only by differing positions in a universal chronology, we find a picture—strikingly resonant of our contemporary world—of a complex pattern of intra-national socio-economic interdependence.

So the evolutionist, unilinear model of historical development is not the only one that we find in Marx: at repeated intervals after the defeated revolutionary conjuncture of 1848 we find references that point to a quite different conception, one founded upon an entirely more sophisticated understanding of the nature of the interpenetration of national states—and of an understanding of the complex interplay between the spheres of the social and the political. The premise for this view—never fully developed and only ever tantalisingly suggested in Marx’s writings—was his assessment of the reasons for the defeats of 1848. Initially, Marx and Engels foresaw the revolutionary struggles of this conjuncture as incorporating a combined conflict with the bourgeois against the bulwarks of European absolutism. However, over the course of the year, as it became increasingly clear that the bourgeois-democrats were rather more chary of the threat of plebeian revolt from below than of aristocratic reaction from above, both Marx and Engels—especially following the capitulation of the Frankfurt Assembly in September—began to address the possibility that what was on the historical agenda was not simply the fall of absolutism but the overthrow of the bourgeoisie as well; and clear in this conception was a break from the view that socio-political development in each country would necessarily follow the same set of pre-ordained historical stages; the idea—tentatively pre-figured in the *Manifesto* of a capitalist equilibrium of developed and backward nations, was now bolstered by the suggestion that less developed nations could ‘skip’ certain of the stages of historical development that the more advanced had of necessity experienced. Implicit in this

²⁷ Cowling, 16-17 (my italicisation). The concluding section of the paragraph, however, betrays something of an ‘economistic’ bias, which informs to some degree the underestimation of the political dimensions of the national question displayed by Marx and Engels:

As in the production of material things, so also with intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common currency. National partiality and narrowness become more and more impossible, and from the many national and local literatures a world literature arises.

This reservation notwithstanding, Marx’s account is a remarkable and prescient one, as David Harvey notes: ‘If this is not a compelling description of “globalisation” as we now know it then it is hard to imagine what would be.’ ‘The Geography of Class Power’, *Socialist Register* 1998, 54. The full excerpt in the Moore translation runs thus:

The need for a constantly expanding market chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of the Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property.

National one-sidedness, and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

conception—never explicitly drawn out by either Engels or Marx but, as we can see, increasingly evident in their empirical analyses—is a necessary shift in the theoretical framework within which the national question is to be accommodated, from a ‘revolutionary nation’-‘peoples without history’ dualism, to an understanding of a dichotomy of dominant and oppressed nations; to, in other words, an understanding of the national question as also a *political* and not purely a socio-economic question.²⁸

The degree to which Marx maintained this conception is indicated most clearly by his later correspondence with the populists of Russia. The axiomatic position of Russian Marxism as it had emerged in its break with indigenous populism was—along the lines of the kind of linear-evolutionist schema outlined above—that backward Russia would by necessity have to undergo a protracted period of capitalist development before there was any meaningful prospect of some transition to socialism: necessary historical stages were precisely that, and the possibility of ‘skipping’ over them was considered theoretically heretical. Thus it was a matter of some embarrassment to the nascent Russian Marxist movement that, in a polemic directed at the populist theorist Mikhailovsky in 1877, Marx had objected to the accusation that he wanted to transpose on Russia the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ described in *Capital*. Marx disagreed thus:

It is absolutely necessary for [...] [Mikhailovsky] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed [...].²⁹

Even more suggestively, in his 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich, Marx was to argue that:

In analysing the genesis of capitalist production [in *Capital*] I say:

‘At the core of the capitalist system, therefore, lies the complete separation of the producer from the means of production ... the basis of this whole development is the *expropriation of the agricultural producer*. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England... But *all the other countries of Western Europe* are undergoing the same process’ [...].

Hence the historical inevitability of this process is *expressly* limited to the *countries of Western Europe*. [...]

Hence the analysis provided in *Capital* does not adduce reasons either for or against the viability of the rural commune, but the special study I have made of it, and the material for which I drew from original sources, has convinced me that this commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia, but in order that it may function as such, it is necessary to eliminate deleterious influences which are assailing it from all sides, and then ensure for it the normal conditions of spontaneous development.³⁰

It is the conception implicit in these texts on Russia—that history tends to move not in a unilinear fashion, but dialectically, through a process of discontinuities, ruptures and sudden leaps—that is the essential precondition for the development of an assessment of the nation in history, and of national movements, that is fully sensitive to their actual relation to the broader question of human progress and historical development. Of course, neither Marx nor Engels ever drew out the full implications of this view in a systematic fashion: that would have to be a task for a subsequent generation of Marxists. Yet here, in these fragments of texts, we can indeed find the germ of a theoretical framework that marks a

²⁸ See the remarks in Michael Löwy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth: Essays on the National Question* (London and Sterling, VA, 1998), 20, 26-29.

²⁹ ‘Letter to *Otechestvenniye Zapiski?*, *MECW*, vol. 24 (1989), 200.

³⁰ ‘Marx to Vera Zasulich’, *MECW*, vol. 46 (1992), 71-72; earlier drafts of this letter are to be found in Karl Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich’, *MECW*, vol. 24 (1989), 346-371. For a fascinating account of Marx and Engels’ connections with the Russian movement, see Isaac Deutscher, ‘Marx, Engels and the Russian Revolution’, *International* 4.2 (Winter 1977), 18-26.

genuine break with notions of historical development of an evolutionist and economically reductionist fashion.

VI

Thus is the legacy of Marx and Engels on the question of nations and national movements: the contradictory blandishments of the ‘Manifesto’, along with the uncritical incorporation of the Hegelian theory of the ‘peoples without history’, combine to give us with a very peculiar synthesis indeed. Yet, as we have seen, the period which was opened up after the counter-revolutionary defeats of 1848-9 witnessed something of a shift in the orientation of the founders of historical materialism with regard to nationalism. This shift was of a piece with the strengthening of that trend in Marx’s thought—evident, if nascent, even in the *Manifesto* itself—which emphasised the dialectical interaction of nation-states and nationalities within a single, whole international system, as well as expressing a greater deal of sensitivity to the relationship of the political sphere to that of the social. Yet (and as I have argued, perhaps inevitably) although this latter conception surfaced on a number of occasions in Marx’s work—in particular with regard to the national question with respect to Ireland, and in the form of a more nuanced approach to the possibility of different patterns of national development, in particular with regard to Russia—Marx never systematised his thinking along these lines: he was never able to resolve the tension in his thinking between two distinct models of historical progress, the one linear and evolutionist (and not a little Hegelian), the other far more complex and dialectical.

However, we have what we have; and it is, I would suggest, incorrect either on the one hand to dismiss the manifest failures of Marx and Engels with regard to nationalism as isolated errors incorporated into an otherwise infallible system, or to dismiss out of hand their entire body of work on the question as worthless. The truth is, as ever, not that simple. Perry Anderson:

[C]lassical Marxism should be submitted to the same rigorous scrutiny and critical appraisal as the post-classical tradition that derived from it. [...] The study of classical Marxism today needs a combination of scholarly knowledge and sceptical honesty that it has not yet received. In the post-war epoch, the best and most original work in this field has usually taken the form of ingenious reinterpretations on one canonical text or author [...] often to refute conventional notions about another [...]. Today it is necessary to abandon this practice, and to proceed instead to scrutinise the credentials of the texts of classical Marxism themselves, without any prior assumption of their necessary coherence or correctness. [...] Marx could not remain so politically and theoretically central to the later twentieth century, if he had not at times been out of synchrony with the later nineteenth century in which he lived. His mistakes and omissions may be said to be typically the price of his foresights.³¹

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³¹ Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 112-13.