



Marx, Engels and the Communist Revolution Between Determinism, Telos and Self-Emancipation

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ABSTRACT: It seems that history has tricked the communist movement. It has cast into doubt the certainty of a revolutionary outbreak and victory in the most developed capitalist countries. Former tsaristic Russia had a successful revolution, but shortly after became a highly bureaucratized state—in many respects not very different from other modern state apparatus. This has caused much confusion about the value of the notion of revolution in Marx and Engels. Therefore, this essay attempts to rediscuss the ideas of Marx and Engels in terms of the communist revolution. It is argued that they insisted upon a consequent internationalist approach, with the aim of self-emancipation of the working class, and did not approve proxy politics. Furthermore, they backed down from any sacral doctrine, and persist on the necessity of concrete analysis of concrete situations to come to the most promising strategy. This shows that they were not just thinking abstractly about revolution – and that their method is useful also in revolutionarily unfavorable conditions.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Revolution, Marx, Engels.

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Introduction

Nowadays Marx and Engels are mainly acknowledged as important theoreticians. Even in parts of mainstream academia one grants them at least partly an important theoretical heritage and even important insights into the capitalist society. This merely academic and theoretical approach towards Marx and Engels dismisses their inherently political project (Schieder 2018, 8). In contrast to this way of embracing Marx and Engels as scientacists while simultaneously erasing their political ambitions, I want to insist that one cannot comprehend them adequately without acknowledging the centrality of the concept of revolution (Bohlender et al. 2020). Therefore one must once again quote Engels' famous characterization of Marx at his funeral, when he rightly stated that Marx was "a revolutionist." The same goes for Engels as well.

In contemporary times of a multi-crises capitalism, some regional upheavals occur, but there still exists a lack of a severe and international radical opposition towards capitalism (Graf 2023, 273–75). In fact the "TINA"-narrative (there is no alternative) is still quite common (Fisher 2013, 7), while even stalwart radicals seem to suffer from revolutionary despair.

This is because of the current world-wide situation and the feelings of impotence against the huge supremacy, that modern states have in terms of power and violence.

Reflecting this situation, I argue that it is time to critically rediscuss Marx and Engels' approach towards their ultimate goal and reason, the big elephant, which is often ignored, namely the communist revolution.

With my essay I want to point out how Marx and Engels supported an open-minded and undogmatic approach towards the question of revolution at their times. My thesis is that, while every generation of communist must develop their own concrete ideas and approach through a sharp analysis of the status quo, the traditional reflections from Marx and Engels can still function as a guideline, worthy of a reconsideration even today.

Revolution – definition and material conditions

First, we need clarity about what should be understood under revolution. Marx once famously described revolutions as "the locomotives of history" (MECW 10, *Class struggles in France* [1850], 122). Engels explains:

that the producing class takes over the management of production and distribution from the class formerly entrusted with that task but now no longer

capable of it, and this, in effect, is socialist revolution. (MECW 45, E to Lavrov [1875], 109)

Marx furthermore declares openly that the ultimate goal of the communist revolution was the abolition of all classes (MECW 39, M to Weydemeyer [1852], 65). It is remarkable that one often finds the term “social revolution” (ibid.) as this refers to a peculiarity of the communist revolution. While the bourgeois emancipation declared universal emancipation, it actually stopped after granting political freedom and formal equality. The class rule, for good reasons, was not to be challenged. Therefore political emancipation from feudal shackles was already granted, at least in some Western countries, but the relations of property remained untouched. This was to be changed through the communist revolution.

As we now have an understanding for the term (social) revolution, many more questions are to be answered. One must examine the material base of the revolutionary thoughts, as well as the traditional question of the revolutionary subject.

Starting with the material conditions Marx claims:

A radical social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions of economic development; these are its premisses. (MECW 24, Note on Bakunin *Statehood and Anarchy* [1875], 518)

Already earlier he articulates:

Men build a new world for themselves, not from the “treasures of this earth”, as grobian superstition imagines, but from the historical achievements of their declining world. In the course of their development they first have to produce the material conditions of a new society itself, and no exertion of mind or will can free them from this fate. (MECW 6, *Moralising Criticism* [1847], 319–20)

Same goes for Engels who formulates:

In the beginning, however, each social revolution will have to take things as it finds them and do its best to get rid of the most crying evils with the means at its disposal. (MECW 23, *The Housing Question* [1875], 348)

All quotes have in common that they refer to a material base of the revolution. The conditions, which must be discussed are not abstract, but they exist in the “old” world. That means must deal with the concrete existing circumstances. Now how to revolutions occur? Marx points out:

For revolutions require a passive element, a material basis. Theory can be realised in a people only insofar as it is the realisation of the needs of that

people. (MECW 3, Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law – Introduction [1844], 183)

Engels formulates a similar thought, when stating:

Everyone knows nowadays, that wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background, which is prevented by outworn institutions from satisfying itself. (MECW 11, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany [1852], 5)

Here a first controversial comes in. As revolutions require a severe state of popular unhappiness with the existing conditions, there has always been an overly optimistic approach to this. It is necessary to dive into the discussion of alleged determinism in Marx and Engels.

Capitalism's inevitable tendency to produce crises has been interpreted as a guarantee for a revolutionary outbreak, sooner or later. Engels has many quotes, which prove his determinism on this. In the *Anti-Dühring* he elaborates:

On the other hand this same large-scale industry has brought into being, in the bourgeoisie, a class which has the monopoly of all the instruments of production and means of subsistence, but which in each speculative boom period and in each crash that follows it proves that it has become incapable of any longer controlling the productive forces, which have grown beyond its power; a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin like a locomotive whose jammed safety-valve the driver is too weak to open. In other words, the reason is that both the productive forces created by the modern capitalist mode of production and the system of distribution of goods established by it have come into crying contradiction with that mode of production itself, and in fact to such a degree that, if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions. (MECW 25, *Anti-Dühring* [1877], 145–46)

Additionally, he states:

But since that time modern industry has developed the contradictions lying dormant in the capitalist mode of production into such crying antagonisms that the approaching collapse of this mode of production is, so to speak, palpable; that the new productive forces themselves can only be maintained and further developed by the introduction of a new mode of production corresponding to their present stage of development; that the struggle between the two classes engendered by the hitherto existing mode of production and constantly reproduced in ever sharper antagonism has affected all civilised countries and is daily becoming more violent; and that these historical interconnections, the conditions of the social transformation which they make necessary, and the basic features of this transformation likewise determined

by them, have also already been apprehended. (MECW 25, Anti-Dühring [1877], 253–54)

Engels comes to a teleological approach, which overemphasizes the role of the material conditions, when he stresses:

that revolutions are not made deliberately and arbitrarily, but that everywhere and at all times they have been the necessary outcome of circumstances entirely independent of the will and the leadership of particular parties and entire classes. (MECW 6, Principles of Communism [1847], 349)

For Engels capitalism's inherent contradictions, led him to an overly optimistic point of view. This has been even radicalized and interpreted as a collapse theory.

For Marx things are more complicated. Undoubtedly he also has many teleological quotes. While reminding one of the needed material and social conditions, he clearly tended to be overly optimistic, when writing:

A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis. (MECW 10, The Class struggles in France [1850], 135)

However, unlike Engels, Marx finally came to the insight not to interpret crises as an evidence for the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Contrary through partially destroying capitalist wealth, the system prepares itself for a new round of accumulation. Crises are therefore not mainly negative but have the power to be a stabilizing element of capitalism.

Besides this mechanical materialism, there is also the question whether the impoverishment of workers will become so harsh, that their uprising is the necessary consequence. In the manifesto it says:

The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848] 495–96)

As a result, both Marx and Engels overly optimistic declare:

that the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 496)

Nevertheless one must be aware of the context of this passage. As a manifesto Marx and Engels tried to gain the upcoming working class to join their program. Furthermore they were directly involved into tactical and theoretical debates with other members of the League of the Just, which just changed its name to the “Communist League” (Bohlender 2019, 258–262).

Marx insisted upon the necessity of a capitalist intermediate stage to develop the productivity. There can be little dissent about the fact, that at least in the imperialist centres the material conditions for a liberated society, the famous “realm of freedom” (MECW 37, Capital Volume III [1894], 807) exist. It is even the opposite, while a huge material wealth exists right now, the destructive element of capitalist accumulation will destroy a lot of wealth. This means that revolution nowadays is no longer a question about rather a certain level of material development is already reached, but to secure the existing wealth and to find ways to deal with collapse of ecological system (Saito 2024). Walter Benjamin was right, when grasping the revolution not as the “locomotive of history” but as the necessary emergency break (Benjamin 2010, 153). This leads to a second important point, every revolution needs to work with the circumstances of the old society and needs to transform them. Therefore revolution cannot simply mean, that the workers must seize the power over production, but that the whole purpose of production must be radically transformed. Revolution nowadays must understand how capitalism has ingrained itself into the very roots of (social) life (Mau 2021, 246) and that therefore a deep break with its logic and “rationality” must be achieved. Thirdly, I see it as still being relevant that revolutionary situations occur in times of crises. The contemporary polycrisis, shows capitalism’s inability of regulating its own contradictions without huge social damage and chaos. At the same time we see that crises do not automatically turn into a communist revolution. They can lead to a more authoritarian capitalism, and no victory is secure, as capitalism relies on various pillars of stability (Graf 2023, 273–92). Consequently this leads us to a second crucial component, the subjective element.

The revolutionary subject and progressive circumstances

Not only crises and uneasiness, are regarded as material conditions, but also a certain progress in terms of political freedom. Both, Marx and

Engels supported bourgeois upheavals against feudalism as a necessary precondition for the ultimate goal of a communist revolution (MECW 6 Manifesto [1848], 516). Nevertheless, Marx and Engels were far from being uncontested with this view. Other popular communist agitators, deeply rejected this temporary strategic alliance with the bourgeoisie, as he denounced the capitalists as the exploiters of the working class, whom could therefore not profit from this strategy (Meyer 1977, 190).

Considering the historical circumstances of a triangular class-constellation, between a reactionary feudal aristocracy, an upcoming and liberating bourgeoisie, and the first glimmerings of the proletariat, they ascribed the bourgeoisie a progressive role (Draper 1990, 180). They supported the fight for a democratic republic:

Marx and I, for forty years, repeated ad nauseam that for us the democratic republic is the only political form in which the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class can first be universalised and then culminate in the decisive victory of the proletariat. (MECW 27, Reply to the Honourable Giovanni Bovio [1892], 271)

Or as it says in the Manifesto:

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519)

For that purpose, they also supported temporary alliances with progressive bourgeois forces:

This does not mean, however, that the said party cannot occasionally make use of other parties for its own ends. Nor does it mean that it cannot temporarily support other parties in promoting measures which are either of immediate advantage to the proletariat or spell progress in the direction of economic development or political freedom. I would support anyone in Germany who genuinely fought for the abolition of primogeniture and other feudal relics, of bureaucracy, protective tariffs, and Anti-Socialist Law and restrictions on the right of assembly and of association. (MECW 48, E to Trier [1889], 423)

However, this was always only conceptualized as an instrumental strategic move, for the actual goal of surpassing bourgeois society itself:

It is therefore in the interests of the workers to support the bourgeoisie in its struggle against all reactionary elements, as long as it remains true to itself. Every gain which the bourgeoisie extracts from reaction, eventually benefits the working class, if that condition is fulfilled. (MECW 20, Prussian Military Question [1865], 77)

Consequently, they granted the bourgeoisie to have played “a most revolutionary part” (MECW 6 Manifesto [1848], 486).

One touches a new problem here. Namely the question of the potential revolutionary subject. As seen the bourgeoisie was celebrated as revolutionary against feudalism. The bourgeois revolution was treated as a precondition for the workers' revolution. However, they cannot for a moment regard it as their ultimate goal (MECW 6, *Moralising Criticism* [1847] 332–33). For the ultimate purpose another revolutionary subject came into play, the proletariat.

Reflections about the potential revolutionary subject were brought up, by social theoreticians and mostly utopian socialists at the time. Many of them concluded, that poor people, because of their miserable living conditions will be open-minded to engage in social struggle and therefore must be approached as the potential revolutionary subject. However, what is the important progress achieved by Marx (and Engels) is to locate proletarians in their antagonistic position to the bourgeoisie:

with this a class is called forth which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which is ousted from society and forced into the sharpest contradiction to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class. (MECW 5, *German Ideology* [1846], 52)

They say:

The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 495)

Not only is the proletariat poor and therefore has a reason to rebel, but it also furthermore has a peculiar standing in bourgeois society. It is a “class with radical chains” (MECW 3, 186). As capitalist exploitation refers to an although asymmetric but intertwined dependency between bourgeoisie and proletarians, their resistance against their own exploitation is crucial, when bringing capitalism to its knees.

Other classes, like little farmers, are poor as well. Nevertheless, they are not defined as the truly revolutionary class. This is because poverty is not the decisive moment. Instead, it is the structural peculiarity of the proletariat to be a class, who through overcoming its own existence as a class, simultaneously overthrows the whole system of classes as

such (MECW 3, *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law—Introduction* [1844], 186). The antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie is described as the last antagonistic social relation (MECW 6, *Manifesto* [1848], 485).

Marx and Engels insisted upon the open class fight, as they understood the communist revolution, carried out by the proletariat as the upheaval of most of the society in its own interest (MECW 5, *German Ideology* [1846], 52). Because of that Marx insisted on the necessity of workers to unify to be successful (MECW 6, *Moralising Criticism* [1847], 332). They supported an open approach to this (MECW 6, *Manifesto* [1848], 519).

To sum it up, the proletariat is considered as the universal revolutionary subject. It is the negation of bourgeois society:

which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning of man. (MECW 3, *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law—Introduction* [1844], 186)

For our political practice this means a central insight. It is the great progress from Marx and Engels to connect the objective material conditions with the subjective element of a conscious revolutionary mass movement. Neither does capitalism automatically collapse, nor should one rely on a clandestine conspiracy of revolutionaries, like the pre-Marxian communist Blanqui proposed (Deppe 1970, 23). Furthermore one must nowadays reflect the alteration of class composition in imperialist countries. A debate about who can be counted as a revolutionary agent in modern capitalism is helpful. I believe that it is indisputable that the conservative image of a classic white male blue-collar working class was never an accurate description of actual relations, and new ways of finding “connecting class politics” (Riexinger 2018, 123) must be worked out.

Revolution as radical self-emancipation

The social democratic talking about the big “Kladderadatsch” evokes the understanding of revolution as one immense bang. It suggests one heroic battle between the proletariat and the existing rulers. However, this image does not suit Marx and Engels evolutionary understanding of radical transformation. For them the revolution could not be broken down to a single mass event, directly leading to heaven on earth. Con-

trary they were transparent about the evolutionary character. Furthermore, they also insisted upon the dialectical relation between self-alteration and transformation of the existing relations. The most famous quote here can be found in the third Theses on Feuerbach. It goes:

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. (MECW 5, Theses on Feuerbach [1845], 4)

Similar thoughts can be found in the *German Ideology*:

In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances. (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 214)

The process of revolutionary becoming itself can only be successfully carried out through a revolution. The working class, to become the central agent of a potential future must revolutionize itself before:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 52–53)

Not only in their thoughts, but in their practical actions they must become the revolutionary subject. This is understood as a steady process. The formation of revolutionary subjectivity is not the outcome of a miracle, but the result of continuous fights, as Marx clarifies:

Whereas we say to the workers: ‘You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power.’ (MECW 11, Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne [1852], 403)

Also, Engels affirmed this process-oriented approach, which meant to openly inform workers about the long breath they will need. In a letter to Bebel, he empathizes the necessary evolutionary character of a revolution:

The great mistake made by the Germans is to imagine the revolution as something that can be achieved overnight. In fact it is a process of development on the part of the masses which takes several years even under conditions that tend to accelerate it. Every revolution that has been achieved overnight has merely ousted a reactionary regime doomed from the outset (1830)

or has led directly to the exact opposite of what was aspired to (1848, France). (MECW 47, E to Bebel [1883], 51–52)

Like Engels, Marx insisted upon the permanent revolution. He points out:

This Socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations. (MECW 10, *The Class struggles in France* [1850], 127)

One cannot overemphasise the importance of the permanent character of revolution. In history tempting images of one victorious epic battle have led to wrong concepts, unsuitable for the complex reality, with its *longue durée* of bourgeois society. In addition, one must link the permanent character of the revolution, with the question of the historical subject.

Various petty-bourgeois socialists have worked out their revolutionary plans on behalf of the working class. They did not conceptualize workers as capable of leading a future society. Instead a generous elite should manage them nicely. Robert Owen, for instance, planned to treat the people in his imaginary future society like patients in the most developed psychiatry in the world wide (Draper 2001, 6).

Also the famous tradition of Babeuf and Blanqui supported a clandestine assassination against the current representators of the system. Afterwards they declared the necessity of a temporary educational dictatorship and government on behalf of the workers (Draper 1986, 29–34). This can be linked to the experience of the French Revolution of 1789. In this history was first grasped as changeable through humans as active political subjects. However this enthusiasm sometimes led through an overly technologically approach towards revolutions. At this time the revolution was mainly conceptualized as a matter of the right planning and correct secret preparation (Deppe 1970, 23). Those who should be liberated, where not the first object of concern.

In contrast to that, Marx and Engels supported workers self-government. They wanted to qualify casual workers for becoming political and socially active in the future society. This can be grasped in the famous parole of the International Workers Association:

That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves. (MECW 20, Provisional rules of the association [1864], 14)

In a nutshell. The proletariat is the revolutionary subject. The concept of proxy politics is rejected, a dialectical process of self-revolutionizing and revolutionizing of the objective circumstances is mandatory. In this paradigm revolution is not a single event, but a constant progress. What this demands of communists is to find ways of a right education under false conditions. Assuming that proletarian self-emancipation cannot occur only in the concrete revolutionary situation but must be prepared under the bourgeois reign, one needs to find ways of holistic liberating education (Au 2018). While capitalism fundamentally undermines the flourishing and development of human capacities, one must seek for ways of a liberating radical pedagogy even under those harsh conditions.

The question of violence

The question of violence has been reason enough to disqualify Marx and Engels as extremists, and therefore unworthy of consideration. And it is true, that they were far from opposed to violence for achieving political goals. As so they declare in the Manifesto:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519)

The late Engels repeated the general affirmation of violent actions, when he wrote:

That the proletariat cannot seize political power, which alone will open the doors to the new society, without violent revolution is something upon which we are both agreed. (MECW 48, E to Trier [1889], 423)

In a letter to the communist committee in Brussels, Engels named general communist principles. He named some aims and then clarified, that it was crucial for communists “to recognise no means of attaining these aims other than democratic revolution by force” (MECW 38, E to Correspondence Committee [1846], 82).

In their eyes the revolutionary task to gain power legitimizes the usage of violence to sweep away the old conditions (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 506). Marx reflects upon the basic antagonism of interests, which is always in play, when revolutions break out. The goal of revolutions exists in the disempowerment of those, who are currently in

charge. As a result “it is impossible to emancipate the oppressed class without injury to the class living upon its oppression” (MECW 16, *The Question of the abolition of serfdom in Russia* [1858], 52).

Despite this, Marx and Engels were far away from uncritically promoting violence as a mean by itself. Conversely, they rejected to deliver an abstract goutation of violence. Instead of a general answer to the question, they supported an approach, which critically examines the peculiar situation under historical and social contingency. With reflection about different national conditions, Marx explained:

We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means. That being true We must also admit that in most countries on the Continent it is force which must be the lever of our revolution; it is force which will have to be resorted to for a time in order to establish the rule of the workers. (MECW 23, *On the Hague Congress* [1872], 255)

It is therefore a question, which can only be answered for concrete contingent circumstances. For instance in the more liberal countries like France and the US, Engels even saw the possibility of achieving his goal through the legal way of parliamentarism (MECW 27, *A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891* [1891], 226). England although politically backwards, also was granted the ability to a legal and peaceful victory of the proletariat (MECW 22, *Record of Marx's Interview with The World Correspondent* [1871], 602).

Consequently, “the choice of that solution is the affair of the working classes of that country. The International does not presume to dictate in the matter and hardly to advise.” (ibid.). While optimistic for France, the USA and England, neither Marx nor Engels saw any opportunity for a peaceful win of the working class in Germany (MECW 27, *A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891* [1891], 226). Marx openly points out:

In Germany the working class were fully aware from the beginning of their movement that you cannot get rid of a military despotism but by a Revolution. (MECW 46, *M to Hyndman* [1880], 49)

It is known that Engels shared this opinion about the situation in Germany (MECW 20, *The Prussian Military Question* [1865], 69–70).

To put in a nutshell. Neither Marx nor Engels were opposed to violence, when considered political necessary. Marx declares “Force is the

midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one.” (MECW 35, Capital Volume I [1867], 736). However, it is unsure, whether violence will be necessary. This can only be answered, when discussing concrete situations:

An historical development can remain "peaceful" only for so long as its progress is not forcibly obstructed by those wielding social power at the time. If in England, for instance, or the United States, the working class were to gain a majority in PARLIAMENT or CONGRESS, they could, by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development, though they could only do so insofar as society had reached a sufficiently mature development. However, the "peaceful" movement might be transformed into a "forcible" one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs; if (as in the American Civil War and French Revolution) they are put down by force, it is as rebels against "lawful" force. (MECW 24, Parliamentary Debate on the Anti-Socialist Law [1878], 238)

Not only does the evaluation of the usage of violence vary in different political contexts. What is even more important to Marx and Engels is the potential violent response to revolutionary outbreaks. It is not for the proletariat to solely decide, whether brutal violence will be needed. As revolutionary communists are faced with hostility from the governments (MECW 22, Record of Marx's Speech on the Political Action of the Working Class [1871], 617) it is not up to them to determine, whether the battle to gain the state power will be bloody or not. Engels remarks:

It remains to be seen whether it will be the bourgeois and their government who will be the first to turn their back on the law in order to crush us by violence. That is what we shall be waiting for. You shoot first, messieurs les bourgeois! No doubt they will be the first ones to fire. (MECW 27, Socialism in Germany [1892], 241)

Although Marx and Engels did not back down, they insisted upon the possibility of a less violent revolutions, than the bourgeois victory over feudal structures (MECW 20, Speech at the Polish Meeting in London [1867], 200).

In this complex situation, the motto could be grasped as peaceful, when possible, violent when necessary (MECW 22, Record of Marx's Speech on the Political Action of the Working Class [1871], 618). Violence is not rebuked, however it is seen as a potentially necessary cause, which should be avoided, whenever the objective political relations allow it.

This leads us to a pragmatic, but still cautious resume. Granting that repressive regimes will not let their power wane without resistance, it might become necessary to defend the revolutionary cause. At the same time one should be sceptical of a romantic about revolutionary violence, which leads to an ignorance about the harmful and dramatic consequence of violence. When one fights for communism as a remedy to the violent bourgeois status quo, he/ she should not play down the danger of an escalating violence and revengeism. In this case one can follow Rosa Luxemburg's bonmot:

A world must be overthrown, but every tear that has flowed even though it could have been wiped away is an accusation, and a person rushing to important action who crushes a poor worm through gross carelessness commits a crime. (Luxemburg 1919, 406)

The question of regionality vs. internationalism

It is a well-trodden truth that "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519). International solidarity was always worshipped as a core value, for left-wing movements. Nevertheless history tricked the radical workers movement, as the revolution not only did not breakout in the imperialist centres, but did not even successfully splash over, to those countries. Russia remained alone for a long time. And the path of "socialism in one country" was announced, by Stalin. Marx and Engels did leave little room for speculations about the centrality of a worldwide revolution. Marx elaborated:

That the emancipation of labour is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists, and depending for its solution on the concurrence, practical and theoretical, of the most advanced countries. (MECW 20, Provisional Rules of the Association [1864], 14)

The internationalist approach was upheld by Marx and Engels, when they explained:

[...] the International is a genuine and militant organisation of the proletarian class of all countries united in their common struggle against the capitalists and the landowners, against their class power organised in the state. (MECW 23, 107)

Undoubtedly Engels referred to worldwide liberation, when he declared:

To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. (MECW 24, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* [1880], 325)

The basal internationalist agenda is clear. Always referring to inherent internationalist character of the working-class movement, is precisely the task of communists (MECW 6, *Manifesto* [1848], 495). However, on more practical questions of daily politics, Marx and Engels conceded:

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 of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie. (MECW 6, *Manifesto* [1848], 495)

It is complex, how Marx and Engels thought about the role of colonies and less developed countries in terms of the revolution. There are many examples, where Marx even positively discussed some consequences of colonialism (Lindner 2010). In the “Grundrisse” Marx celebrated the “civilising influence of foreign trade” (MECW 29, *Grundrisse* [1861], 480). This shows what unilinear scheme of evolution Marx did support at a certain time of his intellectual biography (Basso 2016, 81). During his lifetime, Marx intensified his studies on non-western societies (Achcar 2013, 83). Consequently, he came to a way more nuanced evaluation.

Already in his 1850 newspaper articles he posed the question whether “mankind [can] fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in [...] Asia” (MECW 12, *The British rule in India* [1853], 132). He also reflected on the possible revolutionary effects an upheaval of the Irish colony can have on destabilizing the imperialist British mother country (MECW 43, *M to Meyer & Vogt* [1870], 474). As he treated the rivalry and the prejudices between the British and the Irish working class, as “the secret of the English working class's impotence, despite its organisation” (ibid., 475). He concludes, that the fight for Irish independency plays a crucial role in destabilizing the ruling bourgeois order in the most developed capitalist country of the time, namely England:

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 Ireland publicly everywhere. (MECW 43, M to Meyer & Vogt [1870], 475)

Another example of Marx ascribing upheavals in non-hegemonial countries a crucial role in destabilizing the capitalist order in the imperialist mother countries, is China. He declares:

it may safely be augured that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent. It would be a curious spectacle, that of China sending disorder into the Western World. (MECW 12, *Revolution in China and in Europe* [1853], 98)

Although Marx thought, that the decisive question would be, if a revolution can be achieved and secured in the capitalist centres, he assigned world political circumstances an important role. What this points out, is that Marx already had an understanding of an intertwined capitalist world market and system, in which instability in one subaltern part of the world could directly influence the stability of the imperialist nations.

The most obvious example is his discussion about the potential transmission of the Russian village into communism. In a letter to Sazulitsch Marx clearly rejects an unilinear approach. He rejects the accusation of carrying out a philosophy of history, as one critic of him has said:

But this is too little for my critic. It is absolutely necessary for him 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, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer. (MECW 24, *Letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski* [1877], 200)

Here he clearly rebukes a teleological and Eurocentric approach to history and social development. Instead, Marx affirmed the possibility of a leap from the commune in Russia, to advanced communism (MECW 24, *Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich* [1881], 346–49). However, as Marx remarks, “Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world” (ibid., 349). Under consideration of (worldwide) polit-economical circumstances, Marx concludes: “To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed” (ibid., 357). In general Marx believed in the ability of a Russian way towards communism. Nevertheless, the conditions in Russia cannot be looked at isolated. The Russian path, according to

Marx and Engels could not be successful, without a win of the proletariat in the west (MECW 24, Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto [1882], 426).

Engels clearly emphasised the decisive role, of the western proletariat, when he announced.

If anything can still save Russian communal ownership and give it a chance of growing into a new, really viable form, it is a proletarian revolution in Western Europe. (MECW 24, Refugee Literature [1874], 48)

At the same time, he assured, that Russia is on “the eve of a revolution [...] a revolution that will be of the greatest importance for the whole of Europe” (MECW 24, Refugee Literature [1874], 48).

Elsewhere Engels made even clearer remarks:

It is quite evident from this alone that the initiative for any possible transformation of the Russian commune along these lines cannot come from the commune itself, but only from the industrial proletarians of the West. The victory of the West European proletariat over the bourgeoisie, and, linked to this, the replacement of capitalist production by socially managed production—that is the necessary precondition for raising the Russian commune to the same level. (MECW 27, Afterword [1894], 425)

The hegemonial evaluation of (semi-)peripheral countries as not being the determining revolutionary force should not be interpreted as a denial of the historical agency of subaltern subjects. Moreover, Marx and Engels were aware of the centrality of violence and force, when establishing a new anti-capitalist society. They declared the aim of the “revolution permanent” (MECW 10, Address of the Central Authority to the League [1850], 281), at least in “all the dominant countries of the world” (*ibid.*). It is not merely a question of epistemologically acknowledging subaltern subjects as revolutionary actors, but a question of power relations in the imperialist world system and the (in-)ability of subaltern revolutions to build up a new society, while coping with counterrevolutionary upheavals, financed by reactionary states and dealing with harsh economic sanctions.

To conclude, Marx and Engels mainly concentrated on the imperialist hegemons and ascribed them a special role. This is due to the materialist precondition of developed productivity, they believed to be necessary. Furthermore, it can be seen in relation to their reflection on the essential role of violence in revolutions. This, should not mean, that especially Marx, did not reflect about the role of non-western countries. During his lifetime he learned, and slowly moved away from an unilinear model of development (Lindner 2010). Through analysing subaltern

resistance, he saw potential to connect perspectives. He developed a first model of global interdependency and granted subaltern upheavals significance as a potential starting point of wider revolutionary outbreaks (Pradella 2017, 587). Marx affirmed the potential success of a communist revolution, starting in Russia, under the condition, that it was completed by a revolution in the western countries (Basso 2016, 96). Beyond any doubt Marx and Engels always supported an internationalist agenda. They were convinced of internationalism not merely as a moralistic value, but as a necessary condition for a successful revolution. However, Marx and Engels tended to one-sidedly celebrate movements of national sovereignty as a step towards the right direction. With this position they were far from unchallenged in the “League of Communists” (Güner 2023). Other communists insisted that nationalism was never a progressive element and distracted workers from understanding their national bourgeoisie as their real enemy. Perhaps nowadays this should lead to a critical reexamination of the alleged progressive role of national liberation movements. Maybe it makes sense to re-discuss a form of not international, but antinational communism.

Revolution – and then?

As pointed out Marx and Engels did not believe that the revolution should be understood as a one-day-project. For that reason the speaking of a “Kladderadatsch”¹ (MEW 37, E to Schmidt [1889], 325) is misleading, as it evokes a short violent outbreak, in which the workers gain the power and afterwards build up socialism. It is true that Marx and Engels were convinced in the necessity of a (violent) action against the reigning bourgeoisie to take away their power. However, they saw this battle only as the starting point for a further process of constant revolutionizing. After a first successful takeover the proletariat must seek to manifest its position, or as Engels put it:

the enemy once beaten, they must establish measures that will guarantee the stability of their conquest; that will destroy not only the political, but the social power of capital, that will guarantee their social welfare, along with their political strength (MECW 6 The Reform Movement in France [1847], 381).

It is central to take a deeper look at the role of the state. Marx and Engels were aware of the potential threat from counterrevolutionary forces, which must be kept down. To fulfill this purpose a temporary

1. Not adequately translated in the English Version, therefore quoted from the German Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW).

“dictatorship of the proletariat” was announced as a necessary step (MECW 10, *Class struggles in France* [1850], 127). This term “dictatorship” was falsely interpreted as a proof for the totalitarian and authoritarian agenda. However, dictatorship, during the lifetime of Marx and Engels, was not as negatively connoted as it is today (Draper 1986, 26–28). Thus, it was common practice to describe the bourgeois state, as the dictatorship of the bourgeois class, without implying an especially violent or authoritarian state (MECW 11, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852], 124). In the “Manifesto” Marx and Engels identify political power as “merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another” (MECW 6, *Manifesto* [1848], 505). Following this analysis the constitutional system therefore was described as a “dictatorship of his united exploiters” (MECW 10, *Class struggles in France* [1850], 122) against the proletariat. The term of the dictatorship implies that is only a temporary form of defending the revolution against conservative and reactionary forces. Marx and Engels openly declare:

every provisional political set-up following a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that. (MECW 7, *The Crisis and the Counter-Revolution* [1848], 431)

Additionally to that Marx makes this clear, when he explains:

this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society (MECW 39, *M to Weydemeyer* [1852], 65).

It is indispensable to recognize the importance of this temporary epoch of “dictatorship” to secure the revolutionary status quo (MECW 7, *The Programmes of the Radical-Democratic Party and of the Left at Frankfurt* [1848], 50). Engels even admitted the necessity of a communist army to secure the revolution against the influence of counterrevolutionary other states or classes. At the same time, he did not see the necessity of a standing army under communism (MECW 4, *The Holy Family* [1845], 249).

Nevertheless, this cannot be simply understood as an instruction to instrumentalize the given bourgeois state to keep down the counterrevolutionary forces. One important insight from the Paris Commune directly touched the relationship between revolutionary transmission periods and the role of the existing state:

From the very outset the Commune was compelled to recognise that the working class, once come to power, could not go on managing with the old

state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against it itself, and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment. (MECW 27, Abstract from *The Civil War in France* [1891], 189)

The Commune was lauded especially for not remaining in the common state order:

It was a Revolution against the State itself, this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people, of its own social life. ... The Commune was its definite negation, and, therefore the initiation of the social Revolution of the 19th century. (MECW 22, *Drafts of The Civil War in France* [1871], 486)

While they believed in the necessity of implementing a temporary “dictatorship” to secure the revolutionary situation, they were highly sceptical of the state. This does not mean, that they blindly supported a direct abolishing of any state. Moreover, it was about an evolutionary process, to constantly undermine the necessity of such a “supernaturalist abortion of society” (MECW 22, *Drafts of The Civil War in France* [1871], 486). Engels stressed this intertwined relationship, where the state was criticised, but at the same time, granted a necessary existence in the transmission period (MECW 47, E to van Paten [1883], 10).

All in all, one must once again stress the evolutionary character off the post-revolutionary character. The revolutionary conditions, the proletariat has successfully fought for, must be secured. When necessary, also through the use of violence. Meanwhile the state was not praised as an instrument for installing socialism, as meant by many utopians or petty-bourgeois socialists. It was characterised as a temporarily needed institution, which should be regarded as an institution whom right of existence diminishes with the successful ongoing of the revolution.

What this points out, is that revolutionary romanticism of heroic battles on barricades are misleading and raising false hopes to revolutionary agents. The last part underlines, that the revolution must be grasped as an ongoing-longterm challenge, which demands an understanding of steps and evolution rather than of one gigantic big bang.

Conclusion

Marx and Engels did not deliver a transtemporal theory of revolution. Instead, they insisted upon the necessity to seek for concrete answers to concrete political questions. The revolutionary overcoming of capitalism

will not be the consequence of any deterministic inner logic, but the action of revolutionary communists leading the working-class as active subjects, who take their history into their own hand. Unlike, other socialists at the time, Marx and Engels understood revolution as a process of radical self-emancipation. They supported an evolutionist approach in regards to revolution, in terms of a progress. This evolutionism does not evoke revisionism, but merely a materialist approach, which denies unscientific utopianism. Today it is upon on us to try to give those concrete answer to the concrete circumstances of our times. For now I see three main points which need to be worked out.

Firstly, I believe that the discussion about revolutionary subjectivity must be deepened. Marxists should try to find ways to deal with the contradiction, that the revolution and a successful communist society requires people far more developed, compared to their existence under capitalism, where education and personal development are structurally withheld from a major part of the world.

Secondly, the critical debate about eurocentrism and possible other paths to the revolution must be enhanced. From my standpoint it is highly questionable whether “western” bourgeois societies while developing in many countries of the global periphery as well, will actually include them in their realms of power, due to the tacit role of imperialism.

Thirdly, in accordance with the debate about a pragmatic internationalism, the central question remains the seizing of power and defending the possible revolutionary achievements against the supremacy of counterrevolutionary forces. This seems to be even more challenging when we consider the current non-existence of viable socialist alternatives and support on the level of states. Furthermore, this leaves communists not only with the challenge to seize and defend power against counterrevolutionary forces, but at the same time with the task to avoid an authoritarian course.

My essay on these old questions was written to invite other Marxist scholars to engage in those practical debates.

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Biography

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