
Marx, Engels and National Movements is a collection, joined with commentary, of Marx and Engels’ observations on the national question. The observations appeared in their lifetime in newspaper articles, lectures, letters and as sub-topics in major theoretical works.

In their writings of the 1840s, Marx and Engels considered that capitalism and national independence went hand in hand since independent national economic development was the raison d’etre of the bourgeoisie. Capitalism was intimately linked with the emergence of a national capitalist class shaped by and controlling the nation state. Further, Marx and Engels believed that capitalism manifested an objectively progressive character, it compelled non-European lands “to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, ie to become bourgeois themselves. In one word it create(d) a world after its own image” (from the Manifesto. This view — that the non-European world was fated to become essentially like Western Europe — was coupled with the view that “everything that centralises the bourgeoisie is advantageous to the workers” (Marx to Engels, July 1866). Bourgeois hegemony they thought, would bring unity to small and fragmented states, and in the long run, this was helpful to the international workers’ movement.

Eurocentrism

Engels (in 1849 at least) was even sharper in his eurocentrism, talking of “residual fragments of peoples (who) always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution and remain so until their complete extirpation or the loss of their national character”. Such were the Southern Slavs, the Czechs, the Morovians, the Slovaks, the Gaels, the Basques, the Bretons who were peoples who “never had a history”. Indeed, Engels’ eurocentrism slipped into racism when he posited the existence of “entire reactionary peoples”.

Following the revolutions of 1848, Marx and Engels reconsidered their attitude to the small and semi-feudal nations of Central and Eastern Europe, and to India and China. But the reconsideration was based on tactical concerns, each national movement being judged progressive or reactionary to the extent that it might weaken — or even hasten — the crisis of capitalism in Western Europe.

In Capital Marx demonstrated that industrial capitalism owed its birth partly to the destruction of nations outside of Western Europe. With the growth of industrial capitalism the conquered territories, initially a source of tribute and raw materials, took on additional importance as markets for manufactures. As the existence of such markets helped to stave off the decline in the rate of profit, a crisis within colonial economies, Marx argued, could have a substantial dislocating effect on capitalism in Europe.

Ireland, English capital’s first colonial acquisition, played a vital role in maintaining the stability of the English ruling class. Marx and Engels watched events in India and Ireland closely, in the hope that political and/or economic crises there would have a destabilising effect on ruling class hegemony in England. Their consideration of India, Ireland and Poland remained at this level: that the freedom of subjugated nations remained dependent upon the triumph of the European working class, but political and economic events within the dominated nations could have a crisis-inducing significance in Europe itself.

Events in Poland in 1863 forced Marx and Engels to again reconsider their approach. In that year the Poles rose against Russian Tsarism and were savagely repressed. Elements of the gentry headed the nationalist movement but, as a class, Polish serfs stood to gain more from the continued overlordship of Russia, for territories controlled by Russia had carried through the emancipation acts ordered by the Tsar in 1860. National interest or class interest? — the socialist movement was divided. Some argued that what served the interests of the most oppressed and exploited class most directly and immediately was what mattered. In this case the emancipation of the serfs under Russian domination was better than Polish self-determination coupled with oppression and inhumanity at the hands of Polish landlords and gentry.

Marx and Engels, on the other hand, argued that the cause of national self-determination came first.
Engels sharply criticised those Polish socialists who did “not place the liberation of their country at the head of their programme....In order to be able to fight one needs first a soil to stand on, air, light and space. Otherwise all is idle chatter” (Engels to Kautsky, 1882).

In putting this position, Marx and Engels were again influenced by strategic and tactical questions. Russia was “the great bastion of European reaction”; whatever weakened Russia, objectively served the interests of the European working class movement as a whole.

On reconsidering Poland, Marx and Engels thought again of their position on Ireland. Just as Polish nationalism would weaken Russian hegemony, so too would Irish liberation strike at the heart of British capitalism. Ireland was important to Britain not only as a market for British investment and manufactured exports; it was a source of cheap labour power. Indeed, the importation of Irish workers was fostered by British capitalists in part to divide and weaken the working class. The freedom of Ireland would ameliorate this condition, and furthermore it would deprive the English government of “the only pretext (it had) for retaining a big standing army which....(could) be used against the English workers after having done its military training in Ireland” (Marx, 1870). So important was Ireland to the rule of British capital, Marx concluded in 1870, that the national emancipation of Ireland was a precondition for socialism in England. Marx and Engels no longer considered that the national self-determination of colonial possessions would have to await the victory of the European proletariat, indeed, struggles for national independence might not only trigger revolutionary upsurges in Europe, but might be essential to their success.

In the last years of his life, Marx continued to reappraise his views of the nature of nationalist struggle. His most important theoretical work, Capital, laid bare the workings of industrial capitalism in Western Europe, but did not seek to describe the laws of motion of other modes of production. A revolutionary upsurge in Russia led him to question his view that precapitalist social formations need necessarily be transformed, and capitalism implanted, before the transition to socialism could be effected. Perhaps it was possible for socialism to be achieved in places where capitalism had not become dominant? As far as Russia was concerned, the question was to prove academic. By the late nineteenth century the capitalist mode was well established — even transforming social relations in the countryside. Marx’s encounter with the Russian populists and anarchists of the Narodnaya Volya stirred his heart and set his mind racing, putting him at odds with the pedants among the Russian marxists. Even in old age he did not fear new knowledge and experience.

Cummins is less concise than the above summary of Marx and Engels’ views on self-determination suggests, and this is one of the puzzles of the book which describes at length, and with copious quotation, what Marx and Engels had to say about national movements. But the book stops there. Collections of Marx and Engels on India, Ireland, colonialism and the national question have existed for some time and are well known to marxists with an interest in the third world. So it is difficult to see the use of a further compilation.

All around Cummins rages a debate within marxism on the question of national self-determination. Marxists in the debate have long since ingested the views of Marx and Engels, and indeed the emergence of the Dependency School was partly a reaction to the ritualistic adoption by some Latin American communist parties of Stalin’s rigidification of Marx and Engels’ hesitant, unformed views. For Cummins, it is as if this debate had never happened. He reminds marxists again of the ethnocentrism of Marx and Engels, something worth being reminded of, but to stop there is less than adequate.

Since Marx and Engels, marxist historians and social scientists have made substantial theoretical advances in the analysis of non-capitalist modes of production and their relationship to Western European capitalism. If Cummins should remind us of the origins of this growth and development in order to contribute to it, then one could not complain; but to restate the views of the old masters, as if nothing had happened since, serves little purpose. The restatement of Marx and Engels, in a vacuum as it were, is even more curious because Cummins’ bibliography contains work by Kiernan, H.B. Davis and Draper, three whose writings in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies contributed to the reopening of the whole question of marxism and nationalism.

A reassessment of the contribution of Marx and Engels, in the light of the recent debate, would have been timely especially since Geoffrey Kay has resurrected Marx’s aphorism that “industrial capitalism creates a world after its own image”, arguing that the problems of the third world result
not so much from the exploitation of capital but from the fact that capital did not exploit them enough. Such bold claims bolster the assertion that the problems of the agrarian socialisms developed in China, Vietnam and Kampuchea are at least partly attributable to the stunted and still-born capitalism which preceded them. Such is the gravity of the debate and the importance of a reassessment of the place of Marx and Engels within it. Unfortunately, Cummins does not seem to be aware that it is even taking place.

The scholarly nature of Cummins work is not at issue. Perhaps unfairly I am criticising him for not doing what he did not set out to do. At root, the difference is between one who sees the work of Marx and Engels as a complete and interesting object of study, and another who considers marxism as alive, growing and, above all, useful—the difference between a marxologist and a marxist.

Finally, some comment must be made on the price of the book. At an outrageous $44, each page is priced at more than 21 cents. The whole book could be photocopied for less than $10.


On April 29th, 1965, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced his Government’s decision to commit Australian combat troops to the war in Vietnam. During the following six years, thousands of young Australians were sent to fight in a war which seemed to have little relevance for Australia. When Australian troops were finally withdrawn by the end of 1971, nearly 500 had been killed and 2,500 wounded. Countless others still suffer from physical and psychological disorders attributable to their time in Vietnam.

Why did the Australian Government decide to commit Australian forces to Vietnam? Was it pressure from our great protector and ally, the United States of America? Or was it in response, as was publicly announced, to a request from the South Vietnamese Government of Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat? These are some of the questions addressed by Michael Sexton, Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of New South Wales, in his book War for the Asking. With access to much relevant correspondence between the United States and the Australian Governments, and other previously unpublished communications, particularly telegrams, between Australian politicians and diplomats in Washington, Canberra and Saigon, Sexton has provided us with a new account of how Australia really came to be involved in Vietnam, which account not only effectively puts to rest certain myths of “external” pressure but also lays the responsibility squarely on our own Government.

In December, 1964, the military position in Saigon was deteriorating and the Americans were faced with a situation of military and political chaos. In addition, international pressure was brought to bear by such countries as France and Britain for the neutralisation of Vietnam. Australia, however, alarmed at any sign of wavering from the United States “set out to use whatever influence it had to push the Americans so deeply into the morass that they would have no alternative but to press on to the end”. The strategy used by Australian politicians, evident from communications quoted by Sexton, was “to arouse concern in the Americans... that their position appeared vacillating or powerless to the rest of the world”. During January, 1965, the situation in Washington remained fluid with no firm decision to put ground troops into Vietnam; nor was any decision made until late February. However, not only did the Australian Government in the three months prior to this decision continually press the United States to bomb North Vietnam and dissuade them from any idea of negotiating with Hanoi, it also pushed for the involvement of Australian combat troops in Vietnam, despite the United States’ request only for instructors.

On 2nd March, 1965, at the direction of President Johnson, the bombing of North Vietnam commenced. On 5th March, US troops landed at Da Nang on the north coast of South Vietnam. At this stage still no formal request was made for troops from Australia, despite constant pressure by the Australian Government for such a formal request. In April, 1965, the Menzies’ Government finally secured approval from the United States for Australian troop involvement and was anxious to immediately make the announcement public; however, the Australian Government insisted that the request be seen to come from Prime Minister Quat. According to Sexton, and supported by evidence from telegram communications, “the last act of this diplomatic drama was to contain some of its most frenetic scenes”, as the South Vietnamese Government had to be “persuaded” of the need not only for additional American troops but also for non-American troops. That the letter from Prime Minister Quat made this quite clear was further evidenced by the fact that it was only finally tabled in Parliament a few months before the last Australian troops were withdrawn.