

International Workingmen's Association 1867

Record of Speech by Karl Marx

On the Irish Question

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This record of Marx's speech on the Irish question on December 16, 1867 was made by Eccarius. It was intended for the journal *Der Vorbote* and was sent by Friedrich Lessner to Johann Philipp Becker in Switzerland but remained unpublished. The record of Marx's speech was first published in English in Marx and Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971.

To the German Workers' Educational Society In London

On December 16, 1867

On December 16, Karl Marx delivered a lecture to the London German Workers' Educational Society on the conditions in Ireland, in which he showed that all attempts of the English government to Anglicise the Irish population in past centuries had ended in failure. The English, including aristocrats, who immigrated before the Reformation ^[386] were transformed into Irishmen by their Irish wives, and their descendants fought against England. The brutalities of the war against the Irish under Queen Elizabeth, the destruction of crops and the displacement of the population from one area to another to make room for English colonists did not change anything in this respect. At that time, **gentleman** and **merchant adventurer** received large plots of land on condition that they would be colonised by English people. In Cromwell's time, the descendants of these colonists fought with the Irish against the English. Cromwell sold many of them as slaves in the West Indies. Under the Restoration ^[387], Ireland received many favours. Under William III, a class came to power which only wanted to make money, and Irish industry was suppressed in order to force the Irish to sell their raw materials to England at any price. With the help of the Protestant Penal Laws^[388], the new aristocrats received freedom of action under Queen Anne. The Irish Parliament ^[389] was an instrument of oppression. Catholics were not allowed to hold public office, could not be landowners, were not allowed to make wills, could not claim an inheritance; to

be a Catholic bishop was high treason. All these were means for robbing the Irish of their land; yet more than half of the English descendants in Ulster have remained Catholic. The people were driven into the arms of the Catholic clergy, who thus became powerful. All that the English government succeeded in doing was to plant an aristocracy in Ireland. The towns built by the English have become Irish. That is why there are so many English names among the Fenians.

During the American War of Independence the reins were loosened a little. Further concessions had to be granted during the French Revolution. Ireland rose so quickly that her people threatened to outstrip the English. The English government drove them to rebellion and achieved the Union ^[390] by bribery. The Union delivered the death blow to reviving Irish industry. On one occasion Meagher said: all Irish branches of industry have been destroyed, all we have been left is the making of coffins. It became a vital necessity to have land; the big landowners leased their lands to speculators; land passed through four or five lease stages before it reached the peasant, and this made prices disproportionately high. The agrarian population lived on potatoes and water; wheat and meat were sent to England; the rent was eaten up in London, Paris and Florence. In 1836, £7,000,000 was sent abroad to absent landowners. Fertilisers were exported with the produce and rent, and the soil was exhausted. Famine often set in here and there, and owing to the potato blight there was a general famine in 1846. A million people starved to death. The potato blight resulted from the exhaustion of the soil, it was a product of English rule.

Through the repeal of the Corn Laws Ireland lost her monopoly position on the English market, the old rent could no longer be paid. High prices of meat and the bankruptcy of the remaining small landowners further contributed to the eviction of the small peasants and the transformation of their land into sheep pastures. Over half a million acres of arable land have not been tilled since 1860. The yield per acre has dropped: oats by 16 per cent, flax by 36 per cent, potatoes by 50 per cent. At present only oats are cultivated for the English market, and wheat is imported.

With the exhaustion of the soil, the population has deteriorated physically. There has been an absolute increase in the number of lame, blind, deaf and dumb, and insane in the decreasing population.

Over 1,100,000 people have been replaced by 9,600,000 sheep. This is a thing unheard of in Europe. The Russians replace evicted Poles with Russians, not with sheep. Only under the Mongols in China was there once a discussion whether towns should be destroyed to make room for sheep.

The Irish question is therefore not simply a question of nationality, but a question of land and existence. Ruin or revolution is the watchword; all the Irish are convinced that if anything is to happen at all it must happen quickly. The English should demand separation and leave it to the Irish themselves to decide the question of landownership. Everything else would be useless. If that does not happen soon the Irish emigration will lead to a war with America. The domination over Ireland at present amounts to collecting rent for the English aristocracy.

386 The *Reformation*, begun in England under King Henry VIII (Act of Supremacy, which declared the King the head of the Church in place of the Pope, and other Acts), was completed under Elizabeth I (the adoption, in 1571, of the “39 articles” of the Anglican Church — a variety of Protestantism). The introduction of the Reformation to Catholic Ireland was a means of subjecting her to the English absolute monarchy and expropriating her population in favour of the English colonists on the pretext of struggle against Catholicism.

387 A reference to the Restoration of the Stuart dynasty in England in 1660. The restored Stuarts (Charles II and James II) continued to rule up to the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. The Restoration was the result of a compromise between the bourgeois elite and the “new” nobility, which had grown rich during the revolution, and the aristocrats supporting the Stuarts. The adherents of the Stuarts, many of whom had lost their estates in England, now received title to confiscated Irish lands in compensation. Only in rare cases did the representatives of the new regime take action on complaints and petitions for the return of property, to Irish owners, and after the 1665 Act such complaints were no longer considered. Thus, the sweeping expropriation of the Irish population implemented during the English bourgeois revolution was sanctioned by the restored monarchy.

388 The Penal Code was a set of laws passed by the English for Ireland at the end of the seventeenth century and in the first half of the eighteenth century on the pretext of a struggle against Catholic conspiracies. The laws deprived the Irish, most of whom were Catholic, of all civil and political rights. Some of the laws were abrogated at the end of the eighteenth century as a result of the growing national liberation struggle in Ireland.

389 The Anglo-Irish Parliament, convoked at the end of the thirteenth century, was initially made up of representatives of the Church and landed aristocracy. In the 1780s, under the impact of the growing national liberation struggle, the English Government extended its rights, but it was abolished in 1801 under the Act of Union.

390 The Anglo-Irish Union was imposed by the British Government after the suppression of the Irish Rebellion of 1788. The Union, which came into force in

1801, abrogated the autonomy of the Irish Parliament. A consequence of this was the abolition of tariffs which had been set by the Irish Parliament.

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