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## **The Presumed Antislavism of Engels**

### **Introduction**

In *Revolution and counter-revolution in Germany*, Engels harshly criticises the nationalistic movements of Slavic peoples that exploded during the 1848 Revolutions. For those opinions, Engels has been charged of anti-slavism, that is of judging „inferior“ the Slavic peoples and of having foreseen the failure of their attempts to form national states.

Many Marxists have objected this critique. F. Mehring note that Engels' articles have probably been modified by the head-editor of the „New York Daily Tribune“<sup>1</sup>. He also affirm that Engels had secret reasons in support of his anti-Slavic opinions, e.g. to attack the Russian autocracy. K. Kausky<sup>2</sup> underlines on the contrary that Engels' discourse didn't concern the Slavic peoples in general.

However these, like many other similar evaluations of the positions of Engels, don't deny his „anti-slavism“ but they attempt to understand its reasons, and thus to „mitigate it“. Even nowadays, almost all Marxists still believe that in the above quoted text as well as elsewhere, Engels argued against Slavic nationalism because he despised the race.

If that were the case, the presumed racism of Engels ought to be extended to Marx, since it was Marx himself who asked his friend to write the articles on the German Revolution on his behalf, and they appeared under his name on the American newspaper. Even if Marx never read them, he must have thought that Engels would have analysed and valued the revolutions not very differently from how he would have done, i. e. he must have been convinced that the theoretical conceptions of Engels were, if not identical, at least very close to his own.

In fact, Marx and Engels had elaborated a new way for interpreting history – historical materialism – together, in Brussels in 1845; and again together they had expounded the same conception in the *Manifesto* in 1848. How could Engels, speaking about the revolutionary movement of the 1848 only three

<sup>1</sup> Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx, Geschichte seines Leben*.

<sup>2</sup> In the „Preface“ to the German edition of the Engels' book.

years after, change his ideas completely, abandon the principles of historical materialism and convince himself that the history is made by „peoples“ and not by class-struggles? Before believing in Engels' anti-slavism, we must thus ask ourselves the following question: which is the relationship between a materialistic-historical and a nationalistic conception of „people“?

There is no point in denying that above all the XIV article of *Revolution and counter-revolution in Germany* contains disparaging affirmations about Slavic populations as well as about other races, yet it must be understood that affirmations like this:

[ganze Gebeit östlich der Elbe und der Saale] und daß es deshalb das natürliche unvermeidliche Schicksal dieser sterbenden Nationen war, diesen Proceß der Auflösung und Aufsaugung durch ihre stärkeren Nachbarn sich vollenden zu lassen.<sup>3</sup>

are not determined by a racial prejudice, but derive from historical materialism's specific conception of „people“. To answer this question, it is crucial to keep in mind that the articles that compose the book are connected and some of them are used to describe the class composition of the national societies at the beginning of Revolution from the point of view of historical materialism.

### **The non-existence of a general anti-slavism in Engels**

Before facing the problem, we must notice, as Kautskij sustains, that Engels never speaks about „all“ Slavic peoples, but only about the inhabitants of a territory with a mixed population which is included between the Elba, the Saale and the Bohemian forest. The affirmations on the „dying nationality“ concern only the inhabitants of these territories in 1848. Any generalisation to all Slavic peoples is arbitrary, as Engels' judgement about Poland clearly shows: he sustains that the Polish nation is reconstructable only within an historical and cultural unity, the principal – but not the only – conditions of which are: „the number of the population and the compactness of the territory“<sup>4</sup>. In the first place Engels judges the nationalistic claims of Polish people from this point of view:

[...] war es ganz natürlich, daß die Polen ohne weiteres die Wiederherstellung ihres Staates innerhalb der Grenzen der alten polnischen Republik vor 1772 forderten. Zwar war diese Grenze als Trennungslinie zwischen der deutschen und polnischen Nationalität schon zu jener Zeit überholt und entsprach ihr mit fortschreitender Germanisierung von Jahr

<sup>3</sup> K. Marx/F. Engels, *Werke*, Band 8, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1960, S. 81 (MEW).

<sup>4</sup> MEW 8, S: 81.

zu Jahr immer weniger; [...] ganze Landstriche, hauptsächlich von Deutschen bewohnt, [...] völlig deutsche Städten.<sup>5</sup>

In these territories, that in antiquity were inhabited only by the Polish people, but which today are populated by Slavic as well as by Germans, it is not any longer possible to pose the problem of the reconstruction of a Slavic state, because it would mean:

[...] aber können sie erwarten, die Geschichte werde um tausend Jahre zurückschreiten, einigen schwindsüchtigen Völkerschaften zuliebe, die auf den von ihnen bewohnten Gebieten überall mitten unter Deutschen und in deutscher Umgebung leben.<sup>6</sup>

Besides, showing not to be driven by anti-slavism, Engels extends his courageous, but hard critique, to many other nationalities which are completely different from the Slavic race:

[...] wie die Walliser in England, die Basken in Spanien, die Niederbretonen in Frankreich und in jüngerer Zeit die spanischen und französischen Kreolen in den neuerdings von den Angloamerikanern besetzten Teilen Nordamerikas.<sup>7</sup>

People of Slavic or Haitian race are not the objective of his critique. Engels wants to underline that allowing these nationalities to form national States would mean „to make demote the history of thousand years.“ This judgement relates historical-materialism to all the terms reported on behalf of nationalities: he ties the „peoples“ into the complex knot of relationships which he and Marx called the „way of production“<sup>8</sup>.

### People, classes and history

The theories that affirm rights of the „peoples“, show that they don't know how to interpret the history of men, because the peoples have since antiquity practised a „mixture“, both of racial and of social conditions. The „historical rights of a people“ is a concept that has been elaborated only recently, an idea that ancient peoples did not worry about, and its „infringement“ (invasions, emigrations, conquests, etc.) have been a normal praxis, wherein the social and cultural development of humanity has germinated. Generally, contacts

<sup>5</sup> MEW 8, S. 51.

<sup>6</sup> MEW 8, S. 81.

<sup>7</sup> MEW 8, S. 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> For the concept of „way of production“ as it is used in this article, see „The concept of structure in *The German ideology*“, in „Beiträge für Marx-Engels Forschung N. F. 1997“, Argument Verlag, Hamburg 1988, S. 61-72.