

Class War at the Border: Reviving Marxist Restrictionism

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Abstract

The question of immigration was once a vigorously contested subject within the international communist movement. Disproportionately affecting the struggle for proletarian emancipation in the United States, the issue was analyzed most assiduously by revolutionaries residing in North America between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Two stances on the question emerged in the course of debate, generating antagonistic divisions in an already factional movement. In the decades which followed, however, the radical left has largely coalesced around a position of *laissez-faire*, i.e., an unrestrained movement of labor to accompany the international flow of capital which has come to characterize the late capitalist epoch. Today, restrictionist sentiments are regarded with suspicion, and are often met with condemnations on the basis of being inherently reactionary and inconsistent with communist principles.

With parties of the far right garnering mass support throughout the West due, above all, to their staunch opposition to immigration, a renewed engagement on the question is in order. Drawing upon the research of numerous Marxist theoreticians, as well as contemporary empirical data, I will argue against the modern consensus and for a return to restrictionist advocacy. I will further demonstrate how differing conceptions of proletarian internationalism explain how analysts, generally operating within the same theoretical tradition, could arrive at antithetical opinions on the subject. The paper concludes with a brief normative defense of border enforcement under conditions of either capitalist or communist administration.

The materialist conception of history teaches that it is folly to expect men in the mass to accept beautiful ideals and work for those ideals as against their present material interests. Marx has clearly shown that it is the material interests and economic necessities of men as individuals and classes that dictates their social conduct and political action. Accepting Marx we are driven inexorably to the position that an organization becomes stronger the more accurately it meets the material interests and economic necessities of the people. Indeed it was for this purpose that the materialist conception of history was made a part of the socialist propaganda—to be a lamp unto our feet, a guide in the darkness, that we would not fall into the morass of impractical schemes while pursuing the beautiful but illusory ideals of altruistic utopianism.

Cameron H. King, Jr.

Surveying the contemporary communist milieu in Western Europe and North America conveys the impression the Marxist tradition has long espoused an unambiguous position on the question of immigration, to wit, free movement and border abolition. When attempting to justify their advocacy of *laissez-faire* immigration policies, activists of this persuasion typically invoke Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's fragmentary remarks regarding the transnational interdependence capital has set in motion and the consequences this has for revolutionary praxis. The impassioned concluding line to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "proletarians of all countries, unite!" is frequently cited, as is Marx's statement in the same work that "workingmen have no country." Another authoritative source sometimes utilized by these activists is the speculation found in an earlier text, Friedrich Engels's 1847 *A Communist Confession of Faith*, wherein it is predicted that the elimination of private property will result in the scope of communal sentiments broadening further than the boundaries observed in bourgeois nation-states.¹ These invocations are intended to signal the orthodoxy of the collocutor. The specific meanings of these lines, however, have long been the source of exegetical contention, with some theoreticians interpreting them as definitive expressions of proletarian internationalism, meant to declare the proletariat are without boundaries and thereby obligated to execute their task without attention to national particularities; and others arguing this to be a fundamental misreading of the texts.²

Irrespective of whether or not national ties meaningfully exist within the proletariat, or can be expected to dissipate, develop, or be augmented following the dismantlement of the capitalist mode of production, a critical omission renders these activists' citations irrelevant; for preceding the famous concluding line to the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels expressly affirm "the

¹ Dirk J. Struik, *Birth of the Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

² In his final work, *Marxist Theory of History, Society and the State; Principles of Marxist Sociology* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts, 1920), Heinrich Cunow, for instance, makes the invaluable clarification that readers should understand that Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto* as a descriptive tract. Hence, the notion that the proletariat are without a fatherland, while of sociological explanatory value, should be understood as a temporary state of affairs. Indeed, with the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship, one should anticipate the development of a genuine sense of national attachment among the working class.

struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle."³ In other words, the terrain of struggle, as it were, will be within the boundaries of the nation-state before all else. This is precisely where the question of immigration in relation to the class struggle emerges.

Karl Marx and the First International

The International Workingmen's Association ('IWA') formed in 1864 as an organizational body of various anti-capitalist tendencies which sought to assist, and gain traction within, the nascent movement of organized labor in the industrializing world. Working hours, general labor conditions, and internal organizational disputes over theoretical orientation dominated the attention of the IWA, but one chapter, in particular, confronted a question for which few others were compelled to grapple.

The sections constituting the American branch of the International Workingmen's Association were frequently embroiled in disputes over doctrinal orientation, a microcosm of what was concurrently transpiring in the General Council. Materialists jostled with idealists over issues surrounding feminism, race relations, and immigration. The latter was of more urgent concern to the Americans than it was to other branches of the International, for reasons of the United States' being a nation uniquely situated to attract migration in the 19th century, e.g. territorial expansion and industrialization. Karl Marx's representative in these matters was the German émigré Friedrich Adolph Sorge. Section 1, located in New York City, and described by historians as "the institutional embodiment of Marxism in America",⁴ was headed by Sorge and was instrumental in establishing materialist hegemony in the American IWA. The *coup de grâce* to the idealists in the International came by way of Sorge appealing to the General Council in 1872 to have Sections 9, 12, and 26—dominated by suffragist sisters Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, as well as other ideological antecedents of what would later be known as 'intersectional' theory—suspended.⁵ From then, until its dissolution in 1874, the IWA in the United States attended exclusively to matters of class, and immigration was among the issues correctly held to be of strategic importance.

In the late 19th century the primary source of low cost labor in the United States derived from the importation of workers from East Asia. Already burdened by the myriad challenges presented by the inexperience and bourgeois political partisanship recently emancipated slaves exemplified, and attempts at organizing workingmen and women from disparate European

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 77.

⁴ Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 187.

⁵ In addition to finding her approach to politics detrimental, and fundamentally at odds with the scientific materialism he and Engels developed, Karl Marx dismissed Victoria Woodhull as "a banker's woman, free-lover, and general humbug" (*MECW*, Volume 23, 636).

nations, the additional obstacle of Chinese immigration was more than the American labor movement was willing to tolerate. In his correspondence with Hermann Schlüter, Friedrich Engels explained the corrosive ramifications the United States' immigration policies were having by underscoring how adept the American bourgeoisie had become in 'playing off one nationality against the other', thereby undermining communist objectives in the country. "[T]here will be plenty more, and more than we want, of these damned Dutch, Irish, Italians, Jews and Hungarians and in the bargain John Chinaman stands in the background who surpasses them all in his capacity for living on dung."⁶ Karl Marx similarly spoke of the American bourgeoisie's strategy of importing "Chinese rabble to depress wages."⁷

As the labor movement began to confront the deleterious effects of East Asian immigration, Friedrich Sorge directed the Marxist sections of the American IWA to provide support for the workingmen assembling a restrictionist response to the growing threat they posed, e.g. by endorsing Robert Blissert's report on immigration.⁸ This sentiment was maintained into Sorge's founding of the Workingmen's Party in 1874, following the IWA's disbandment. Marxist restrictionism was thereby inaugurated; a position that would persist well into the subsequent immigration debates that would incense the Second International.

A House Divided

Despite the demise of the International Workingmen's Association, Karl Marx's and Friedrich Sorge's materialist legacy would proceed to achieve dominance within the parties that would constitute the socialist and communist movements in North America, as well as the preponderance of those belonging to the IWA's successor organization, the Second International. The most consequential of these was the Socialist Party of America. Founded in 1901, the party would come the closest to attaining meaningful political influence in the United States before its descent into factional disputes and eventual decline to irrelevancy.

The party was known to possess broadly three wings: a left, represented by syndicalists like Bill Haywood; a center, typified by figures like Eugene V. Debs; and a right, orientated around Victor L. Berger. However, contrary to popular belief, these factions were divided solely on differing opinions on the role of unionism and party participation in bourgeois elections; the question of immigration transcended these divisions.

Violent altercations between Caucasian and East Asian laborers were the norm throughout the remainder of the 19th century, and by the 20th, American trade unions—with the exception of the Industrial Workers of the World—had reached a consensus that immigration

⁶ Friedrich Engels to Hermann Schlüter, 30 March, 1892; quoted in *The Workers Monthly*, Volume 5, 661.

⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 August 1869; *MECW*, Volume 43, 342.

⁸ Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition*, 209-210.

restriction in general, and the United States' Chinese Exclusion Acts in particular, were in the material interests of the proletariat. The ongoing conflicts surrounding immigration prompted a response by the international socialist and communist movements. Toward that end, in 1907 the Second International convened its seventh Congress in Stuttgart, where, among other subjects, it debated the question of immigration. Delegates from nations directly confronting the issue of mass migration, e.g. the United States, Australia, and South Africa, argued the case for restriction, while the majority of European countries, for which the matter was chiefly theoretical, largely advanced a position of *laissez-faire*. (Ironically, the one American delegate to vote with the majority of Europeans *contra* restriction—Julius Hammer—was sent from the Socialist Labor Party, the institutional successor of Friedrich Sorge's restrictionist Workingmen's Party.) The resolution adopted by the Stuttgart Congress was that of "freedom of migration", condemning restrictionism as "fruitless and reactionary".⁹ Outraged by the idealist reasoning of the Stuttgart Congress, the Socialist Party of America refused to abide by its decision.

The following year, at its National Convention in Chicago, Socialist Party leadership determined that a committee to compile empirical facts on the effects of Third World immigration, and advise the party as to a suitable course of action, should be established.¹⁰ The influential German-American Marxist theoretician and renowned translator, Ernest Untermann, was chosen to head the newly founded Committee on Immigration. Untermann reported the results of the Committee's investigation to the Socialist Party Congress of 1910, as well as the Committee's majority decision: a resolution calling for the "unconditional exclusion" of all East Asian immigration into the United States of America. The Committee's rationale held that capital's importation of labor from undeveloped and backwards nations threatened to exacerbate racial tensions, due to migrants from these countries being content to labor for significantly less than their American and European counterparts, thereby relegating "class war to the rear" and thus "[prolonging] the system of capitalist exploitation."¹¹ The Committee further warned that failure to oppose Third World immigration would "place the Socialist Party in opposition to the most militant and intelligent portion of the organized workers of the United States."

The majority decision was not without controversy within the party and the international socialist press,¹² but it was ultimately not a precipitating factor in the demise of the Socialist Party of America. Most importantly, for purposes of today, it clarified the respective stances a Marxist can reasonably affirm on the question of immigration. Disastrously, the idealism of the Stuttgart resolution holds sway over most at present.

⁹ *The International Socialist Review*, Volume 8 (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 139.

¹⁰ John M. Work (ed.), *National Convention of the Socialist Party* (Chicago: The Socialist Party Press, 1908), 312.

¹¹ J. Mahlon Barnes (ed.), *National Congress of the Socialist Party* (Chicago: The Socialist Party Press, 1910), 76-77.

¹² Ernest Untermann responds to his European and Asian critics in "The Immigration Question", *Social Democratic Herald*, Volume 13, No. 32, 2; Cameron H. King, Jr.'s "Asiatic Exclusion", *International Socialist Review*, Volume 8 (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 661-669 is also a representative response from restrictionist Marxists to the Stuttgart resolution.

Labor Economics and Communist Praxis

Examining the effects of immigration from the standpoint of contemporary empirical data only changes the parameters of the debate marginally. In the case of the United States, the threat of cheap labor no longer derives from East Asia, but rather Latin America; Western Europe no longer has the luxury of analyzing the issue from a position of relative remoteness and comfort, but instead faces increasing influxes of migrant workers from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Bourgeois mythology notwithstanding, immigration does not 'strengthen the economy,' it objectively harms the proletariat. Illegal immigration disproportionately adversely impacts the most vulnerable segments of the working class,¹³ and legal immigration also places downward pressure on wages, as a consequence of the law of supply and demand. Karl Marx opined that one of the means by which the "capitalist class maintains its power" is through the antagonism between native and migrant labor.¹⁴ This remains as true today as it was in 1870.

Trade union membership has been on a downward trajectory for decades and shows no signs of reinvigoration;¹⁵ hence challenging the rising sentiment for immigration restriction among the proletariat in the United States and parts of Europe, via labor organizing, is a futile strategy. Radical organizations remain on the periphery of the political order also, and will likely remain so, until the law of value begins to break down.¹⁶ A sure method to maintain the lamentable estrangement ordinary workingmen and women feel from communist political philosophy, however, is to invalidate their well-founded assessment of immigration being contrary to their material interests with vacuous, idealist platitudes demanding their "international solidarity." The continued failure of contemporary Marxists to convey a sense of sympathy to the working class's perspective on the issue, or possess a plan to adequately secure national borders, is a factor in the proletariat's turn to right-wing populism and fascism throughout the Western world.

Borders After Capitalism

Apart from the grievous material consequences of immigration, it behooves communists to consider the intrinsic logic and justice of borders and boundaries *per se*. A comprehensive

¹³ See, for example, George Borjas, "Immigration and the American Worker: A Review of the Academic Literature," Center for Immigration Studies, April 2013.

¹⁴ Karl Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April, 1870; *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 220-224.

¹⁵ David Milton, "Late Capitalism and the Decline of Trade Union Power in the United States", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 7, 1986, 319-349.

¹⁶ See Henryk Grossman, *Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System: Being Also a Theory of Crises* (London: Pluto Press, 1992) for a compelling model of this historical process.

treatment of the subject exceeds the scope of this paper, but a few areas for further development can be brought to view.

Underlying some of the animating sentiments of prior Marxist restrictionists were, admittedly, racial considerations for which one need not spend much time today. Beginning with Karl Marx, we find the notion that, in addition to favorable circumstances, the very possibility for economic development, in part, depends upon "inborn racial characteristics."¹⁷ In his anthropological writings Friedrich Engels spoke of the "superior development of the Aryan and Semitic races."¹⁸ It is little wonder, then, that we can find later Marxists, like Ernest Untermann, emphatically declaring his determination to ensure his "race shall be supreme in this country and the world";¹⁹ or encounter Victor L. Berger's anxieties regarding a "war of extermination, on economic lines", wherein the "white race could not propagate, could not exist in a competition" with the "yellow race."²⁰ It would, however, be logically fallacious to dismiss the broader arguments in defense of borders many of these same theorists advanced simply because we happen to have the benefit of navigating the world with more informed and sophisticated models of evolution and group differences.

Take, for instance, Untermann's and Berger's metaphor of the nation as a home. The former reminds us that, "when it comes to the question of whether we shall be permitted to live in our own house or whether we should voluntarily abdicate and let somebody else come into our own house, I should think every sensible man would stand for his own house and for the right to live in it, rather than voluntarily emasculate himself and let somebody else in."²¹ Resources are finite, and fraternal sympathies cannot be expected to verge into the masochistic. In a similar vein, the latter calls attention to the fact it is senseless to burn down one's own house just because a "neighbor's house is burning"; rather, the reasonable decision is to defend your own house "and then help your neighbor."²² In other words, the rational response to the privations caused by uneven development stemming from historical and geographical contingency, and capital's laws of motion, is to extend international solidarity to the would-be migrants' countries of origin, and to assist in their defeat of their bourgeoisie and the communist reconstruction of their nations.

Cultural differences and attachments, a shared national history, and group psychology will not vanish following the collapse of the dictatorship of capital. Indeed, communism may well magnify their relevance, as the range of communal altruism, which a communist mode of production will require of its citizenry in order to function optimally, is likely considerably more

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 794.

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Verso, 2021), 24.

¹⁹ Work (ed.), *National Convention of the Socialist Party*, 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Barnes (ed.), *National Congress of the Socialist Party*, 90.

²² Work (ed.), *National Convention of the Socialist Party*, 111.

modest than Friedrich Engels conjectured, and the cosmopolitan left earnestly believes. This should not be resisted, but rather embraced.