

Revisiting Marx on Race, Capitalism, and Revolution

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Did Karl Marx have a theory of race and capitalism? Not exactly, but he theorized on these issues over four decades and much of what he wrote still speaks to us today. At a time of global and U.S. struggles for liberation in the face of a deeply racialized fascist threat, these writings are worth revisiting.

Marx's most important writings on race center on slavery, capitalism, and the U.S. Civil War of 1861–65. While some of these are widely known, like several key passages in the first volume of *Capital*, a number of his most important reflections can be found in his letters or the documents of the First International. Comprehensive compilations of his writings on the Civil War have appeared in several different collections over the years, starting with one published in 1937 under the auspices of the U.S. Communist Party. The introduction by historian Richard Morais (Richard Enmale, a transparent pseudonym evoking Frederick Engels-Marx-V. I. Lenin) evoked Popular Front themes like “the progressive forces of the nation” versus the reactionaries and stressed that “Marx supported the bourgeois republic in its struggle against the slave oligarchy.” In his introduction to a recently published collection of these writings, historian Andrew Zimmerman stresses instead that, for Marx, “the Civil War was not a bourgeois revolution, but a workers’ revolution carried out within a bourgeois republic that was finally undermined by that bourgeois republic.” Zimmerman also holds that Morais “emphasized unity within the Union cause rather than the disjunctures over the issues of slavery and race” that Marx “highlighted.”¹

Echoes of what Marx and his radical abolitionist comrades called the “slave power” – a coalition of slaveowners, their political representatives, and the wider economic interests that profited from them – can be heard in today’s Republican Party, with its defense of a mythic white United States and a Trumpist mob’s use of the Confederate flag in its assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, during the final recording of the 2020 presidential election ballots. Largely forgotten in the debates over

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what amounted to a fascist coup attempt, with all the talk of two hundred years of peaceful transition of power being broken, are the events surrounding the 1860 election of the mildly antislavery Abraham Lincoln. Not only did this touch off secession and civil war, hardly evidence of a peaceful transition, but at one point an early version of January 6, 2021, also transpired. As historian Ted Widmer recounts, an eerily similar event occurred as the votes for Lincoln were to receive their final tabulation in early 1861, also in the U.S. Capitol. Egged on and organized by the proslavery politicians like the governor of Virginia, armed militias descended on the Capitol to block the tabulation. However, the existing state apparatus responded differently than in 2021, as heavily armed soldiers sealed off the area, preventing the proslavery mob from approaching.²

To be sure, while today's Trumpists and their white supremacist militias draw inspiration from international fascism and right-wing populism, they also look to homegrown traditions of reaction that trace themselves back to that 1861 mob and a form of U.S. racism rooted in the idealized "lost cause" of the Confederacy, one of history's original Big Lies. This kind of politics has always enjoyed a shifting, albeit substantial, popular base, not only among sectors of the middle classes, but also among what Marx called, in generic terms, the poor whites. This is one factor that makes his writings on race, capitalism, and revolution as much a part of our time as his own.

Capitalism and Slavery

Marx tied slavery not only to early, mercantile capitalism, but also to its later industrial forms, which slavery helped spawn and continued to underpin even in his own time. As he wrote as early as 1847 in *Poverty of Philosophy*, "direct slavery is as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery you would have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value, it is the colonies that created world trade, and world trade is the precondition for large-scale industry. Slavery is therefore an economic category of paramount importance."³

Marx viewed this type of slavery as having taken on a uniquely capitalist form, increasing in brutality as the capitalist system developed. Whereas he saw early U.S. slavery as "moderately patriarchal" and less brutally exploitative as long as "production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements," by the nineteenth century he underlined that any such restraint had disappeared, as a nearly limitless supply of enslaved people and the sheer scale of production and trade created a situation wherein "negro life is most recklessly sac-

rified.” This was especially true of the U.S. Deep South and the Caribbean, where “fabulous wealth” was created as gigantic plantations “engulfed millions of the African race.” He used this discussion of the hyper-exploitation and long workdays imposed on enslaved people to counter the argument that “the interest of capital itself points in the direction of a normal working day.”⁴

Marx wrote these lines in the “Working Day” chapter of *Capital*, which focused mainly on the conditions confronting British workers during the early Industrial Revolution, where they too could be worked to death through an ever-increasing workday. He expressed the relationship between wage labor and slave labor in very succinct form in the section on “Primary Accumulation”: “While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact the veiled slavery of the wage-laborers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New world as its pedestal.”⁵

Thus, outright slavery under capitalism was at the far end of a continuum. To be sure, while the formally free wage laborer was definitely expendable, what Marx termed *wage slavery* never equaled direct slavery in its oppressiveness. And just as outright slavery needed to be abolished, so did capital’s unrestricted ability to use impersonal economic forces to work “free” people to death in its unbounded quest for value: “Capital, therefore, takes no account of the health and life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so,” such as by passing laws restricting the length of the working day.⁶ Such a death grip on labor was even more pronounced under capitalist slavery.

Class Solidarity Across Racial Lines: Potentials and Barriers

Marx singled out the relative privilege – and the racialized, alienated consciousness – of northern white workers in the United States in a letter he composed on behalf of the entire First International to Lincoln in late 1864: “While the working men, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic; while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation, but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.”⁷

As Marx’s letter suggests, this racialized consciousness was shaken up by the U.S. Civil War. Marx made this point with greater specificity a few years later in *Capital*, published just two years after the war ended. The fight for a shorter working day had hit a roadblock in the United States

in the period before the Civil War because the structural racism that underlay the economy, which featured in bifurcated fashion both enslaved Black and formally free white wage labor, each on a vast scale, undermined the development of a strong labor movement for many years.

In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. *Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.* However, a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours agitation, which ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California, with the seven-league boots of a locomotive. The General Congress of Labor held at Baltimore in August 1866 declared: "The first and great necessity of the present, to free the labor of this country from capitalistic slavery, is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working day in all the states of the American Union. We are resolved to put forth all our strength until this glorious result is attained."⁸

Thus, the end of the Civil War and the concomitant abolition of slavery created new possibilities for U.S. labor as a whole. Here, in one form of labor solidarity he took up in this period, Marx was anticipating cross-racial links between U.S. workers in a new labor movement. In fact, as recounted by W. E. B. Du Bois, success in these terms was limited, as the mainly – and sometimes exclusively – white trade unions resisted the enrollment of Black workers, while also failing to do enough to support newly freed Black agricultural workers in the South during Reconstruction.⁹ This resulted in (1) the eventual rolling back of much of Reconstruction, especially Black voting rights, by the time of the 1877 electoral compromise whereby Union occupation troops were removed from the South, and (2) those troops being used that same year to crush the great general strike centered mainly in the railroads of the North. But in *Capital* in 1867, Marx was discussing some real possibilities for labor in the period right after the war destroyed what had been a nearly unbridgeable divide between enslaved Black and formally free white labor.

A second type of labor solidarity across racial lines to which Marx pointed took place within the South between poor whites and enslaved people, and later also formally free Black working people. For example, he stressed how only the wealthier and large slaveholders initially supported secession. In a letter to Engels on July 5, 1861, he discussed the social base of the secession vote state by state:

North Carolina and even *Arkansas* elected Union delegates, the former even by a large majority. Subsequently terrorised.... *Texas*, where, after *South Carolina*, there is the largest Slave Party and terrorism, nevertheless 11,000 votes for Union.

Alabama. No popular vote either on secession or on the new Constitution, etc. The convention elected here passed the Ordinance of Secession by 61 votes to 39. The 39 were from the Northern Counties, populated almost exclusively by whites, but they represented more free men than the 61; for, in accordance with the United States Constitution, each slaveholder also votes for 3/5 of his slaves.¹⁰

At a more general level, he noted the reluctance of districts populated by white small farmers – often living in hilly or mountainous areas instead of the highly fertile land of the plains – to support secession. “The interests of the mountain districts, the west of Carolina, the east of Tennessee, the north of Alabama and Georgia, are very different from those of the southern swamps.” Marx can certainly be faulted for exaggerated hopes at this juncture, for the poor whites generally fell into line and volunteered for the Confederate Army. But, toward the end of the war, these became the very districts where antiwar sentiment emerged most strongly among the poor and from which some of the leaders who were to support Reconstruction – attacked by racists as “scalawags” – emerged during the late 1860s and early ’70s. After the collapse of Reconstruction, writing around 1877, Marx again stressed the reactionary side of their consciousness, as seen in a remark on ancient Rome: “The Roman proletarians became, not wage laborers, but an idle ‘mob’ more abject than those who used to be called *poor whites* of the southern United States.”¹¹

The third type of solidarity across racial lines discussed by Marx was that of white British labor toward enslaved Black labor across the ocean. In a February 2, 1862, article, Marx reported on the economic plight of British workers under the impact of the Union naval blockade of southern ports: “The misery that the stoppage of the factories and the shortening of the labor time, *motivated* by the blockade of the slave states, has produced among the workers in the northern manufacturing districts is incredible and in daily process of growth.”¹²

Nonetheless, the working class, he wrote, refused the blandishments of upper-class British spokesmen who advocated putting “an end to the American blockade and English misery.” Instead, he wrote in glowing terms that “the persistence with which the working class keeps silent, or breaks its silence only to raise its voice against intervention and for the United States, is admirable.”¹³

This also involved Marx himself, for the international and interracial solidarity networks the British – and other European – workers formed around support for the Union became an important basis for the founding of the International in 1864, whose first public statement was the aforementioned letter to Lincoln. The International also tried to intervene directly in U.S. affairs after the war, in order to denounce half-heart-

ed efforts under early Reconstruction, warning of a second and even more terrible civil war should Black emancipation not be carried through fully: “Let your citizens of to-day be declared free and equal, without reserve. If you fail to give them citizens’ rights, while you demand citizens’ duties, there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people’s blood.”¹⁴ Though not composed by Marx, this 1865 open letter by the International surely expressed his sentiments.

Black Resistance and Self-Emancipation

Marx also took up the question of resistance by enslaved Black people. As with the formally free working class, this resistance could be passive as well as active. After mentioning the notion in Aristotle and others that a slave is not a human being but a “speaking instrument,” he wrote:

But he himself takes care to let both beast and implement feel that he is none of them, but rather a human being. He gives himself the satisfaction of knowing that he is different by treating the one with brutality and damaging the other *con amore*. Hence the economic principle, universally applied in this mode of production, of employing only the rudest and heaviest implements, which are difficult to damage owing to their very clumsiness. In the slave states bordering on the Gulf of Mexico, down to the date of the Civil War, the only ploughs to be found were those constructed on the old Chinese model, which turned up the earth like a hog or a mole, instead of making furrows.¹⁵

Since this argument did not yet appear in the 1861–64 manuscripts preparatory to *Capital* – as published in Marx and Engels’s *Collected Works*, volumes thirty to thirty-four – it seems to have been added later, near the end of or after the Civil War and thus in the final stages of the book’s development.¹⁶ This suggests an increasing interest by Marx in this period, and a sharpening of his arguments, concerning the politics and economics of race and slavery.

Among the more active forms of Black resistance Marx took up were slave uprisings and participation by Black troops in the Civil War. The best-known instance of the former concerned the failed 1859 attack on a U.S. military outpost in Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, where a band of Black and white abolitionists led by John Brown seized the arsenal in an attempt to touch off a slave uprising. As Marx wrote to Engels on January 11, 1860, in the wake of Brown’s execution: “In my view, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is, on the one hand, the movement among the slaves in America, started by the death of Brown, and the movement among the slaves in Russia, on the other.... I have just seen in the *Tribune* that there was a new slave uprising in Missouri, naturally suppressed. But the signal has now been given.”¹⁷ This passage shows Marx’s clear support for slave uprisings and their core significance for him.

He also viewed the participation of Black troops in the Union Army, which he advocated early on in a letter to Engels on August 7, 1862, as a form of revolutionary self-emancipation: “The North will finally wage war seriously, adopt revolutionary methods, and overthrow the domination of the border slave statesmen. A single...[Black] regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves.... If Lincoln does not give way (which, however, he will), there will be a revolution.... The long and the short of the story seems to me to be that a war of this kind must be conducted in a revolutionary way, whereas the Yankees have been trying so far to conduct it constitutionally.”¹⁸

Here, Marx again refers to white racialized consciousness and to “the remarkable effect on southern nerves” of seeing Black troops in action against the Confederate forces, suggesting that this could demoralize them by demonstrating Black courage and humanity. His use of the *n-word* in this context, though redacted in the above quotation, appears to have been either for dramatic purposes or to have been used with implied scare quotes, evoking how white southerners would perceive such an eventuality. Be this as it may, Marx’s remark on the effect Black troops would have on the war was no idle prediction. There is some evidence that Union victories in battles like Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1863, where Black troops held off Confederates at a crucial juncture, played no small part in the subsequent desertions of many poor whites, some of whom went so far as to form an insurgent “Free State” in Jones County, Mississippi, which briefly fought the Confederacy from inside, enlisted freed slaves, and expressed loyalty to the Union.¹⁹ Even more importantly, their often heroic military service increased the self-confidence and prestige of Black people in the United States, who played a central part in politics and society across the South. The brutal repression that followed as Reconstruction met its demise after 1876 wiped away even the memory of these achievements, something that is now being recovered with a hefty push from the massive Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.²⁰

The Civil War as a Social Revolution: Potential and Reality

The letter discussing the potentially revolutionary character of the U.S. Civil War was typical of how Marx conceptualized this struggle. Despite the foot dragging of the Lincoln administration, which Marx criticized harshly for its half-hearted opposition to slavery, Marx wrote again and again that the logic of events would force the Union to come out for the total abolition of slavery, the use of Black troops, and possibly the redistribution of plantation land to the formerly enslaved (the famous “forty acres and a mule”). The latter was never achieved save in isolated areas. Marx refers obliquely

to this proposed land distribution in the 1867 preface to the first edition of *Capital*: “Mr. Wade, Vice-President of the United States, has declared in public meetings that, after the abolition of slavery, a radical transformation in the existing relations of capital and landed property is on the agenda. These are signs of the times.” Marx also wrote of the Civil War as a forerunner of class-based revolutions in Europe, as in his 1864 letter to Lincoln on behalf of the International: “The working men of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Anti-Slavery War will do for the working classes.” He seemed to see the Civil War as the biggest social upheaval in decades, as in his letter to Lion Philips on November 29, 1864: “When you think, dear Uncle, that three and a half years ago, at the time of Lincoln’s election, the problem was making no further concessions to the slaveholders, while now the abolition of slavery is the avowed and in part already realized aim, you must admit that never has such a gigantic revolution taken place so rapidly. It will have a beneficent effect on the whole world.”²¹

These discussions by Marx – which do not add up to a comprehensive analysis of the Civil War as a revolutionary event, and still less to a systematic theory of race, class, and revolution under modern capitalism – nonetheless point in those directions. His writings on race, class, slavery, and revolution in the United States illustrate a concept of class that is deeply intertwined with the specifics of racial divisions within the working classes, and of the potential for those divisions to be shaken up by upheavals like the Civil War, thus opening up truly revolutionary possibilities.

Far from a class reductionist, Marx viewed these issues through a complex dialectic. Though racism and slavery divided the working class and gave white workers status, if not material compensation – factors that attenuated class solidarity and revolution – these deep social contradictions also had the potential to explode in a revolutionary manner. Millions of enslaved Black people in the South gained self-consciousness and self-confidence during the Civil War and Reconstruction; poor whites of the South saw their world torn apart, their antagonism to the slaveowners deepened, and some of them solidarized with newly freed Blacks and northern white progressives; white labor in the North acquired a new respect for Black labor during the war as they fought alongside each other, combating for a time longstanding fears and prejudices; and the end of slavery called forth the first national labor union the United States had ever seen. For Marx, these issues formed part of the basis of the first volume of *Capital*, which he completed during and just after the Civil War, inspiring him to incorporate important discussions of race, class, and revolution into his greatest book.

Notes

1. Richard Morais [Richard Enmale], editor's introduction to *The Civil War in the United States*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1937), xxv, xv; Andrew Zimmerman, introduction to *The Civil War in the United States*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 2nd ed. (New York: International Publishers, 2016), xxix, xxviii. Besides these collections and the ones edited by Saul Padover (*The Karl Marx Library*, vol. 2 [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972]) and Robin Blackburn (*An Unfinished Revolution* [London: Verso, 2011]) and their introductions, relatively few studies have examined Marx's Civil War writings in detail. Among them are: August Nimtz, *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003); Matteo Battistini, "Karl Marx and the Global History of the Civil War: The Slave Movement, Working-Class Struggle, and the American State within the World Market," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 100 (2021): 158-85; and Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
2. Ted Widmer, "The Capitol Takeover That Wasn't," *New York Times*, January 10, 2021.
3. Karl Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 167.
4. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Pelican, 1976), 345, 377.
5. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 925.
6. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 381.
7. Karl Marx, letter to Abraham Lincoln, November 1864, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 20 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 20.
8. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 414. Emphasis added.
9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1973).
10. Karl Marx, letter to Frederick Engels, July 5, 1861, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 306-7.
11. Marx to Engels, 307; Karl Marx, letter to the editorial board of *Otechestvennyye Zapiski*, November 1877, in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 136.
12. Karl Marx, "A London Workers Meeting," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 19 (New York: International Publishers, 1984), 153.
13. Marx, "A London Workers Meeting," 154.
14. General Council of the International Working Men's Association, "To the People of the United States," in *The General Council of the First International, 1864-1866: Minutes* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), 311.
15. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 303-4.
16. Zimmerman stressed that Marx wrote *Capital*, volume 1, during the same period he was analyzing the U.S. Civil War, while Raya Dunayevskaya went further in her *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 Until Today* (New York: Bookman, 1958), seeing influences of Marx's thinking about the war in the very structure of his most important book.
17. Karl Marx, letter to Frederick Engels, January 11, 1860, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41, 4.
18. Karl Marx, letter to Frederick Engels, August 7, 1862, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41, 400.
19. Marx's use of the *n-word* here and on a few other occasions seems to have been for dramatic effect. In one instance, however, he used it as a pejorative when referring to Ferdinand Lassalle, in a letter to Engels on July 30, 1862 (in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41, 389-90). See also Victoria Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
20. While W. E. B. Du Bois's 1935 study, *Black Reconstruction in America*, was the most important early attempt to recover this legacy, recent overviews of the collapse of the Confederacy and Reconstruction include those by Douglas Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), and Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie* (New York: Random House, 2014).
21. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 93; Marx to Lincoln, 20; Karl Marx, letter to Lion Philips, November 29, 1864, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 42 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 48.



But the business in which slaves are used is conducted by *capitalists*. The method of production which they introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted on it. In this case, the same person is capitalist and landowner.

—KARL MARX, "Theories of Surplus Value," part 2, 303