

On the Dialectics of Race and Class: Marx's US Civil War Writings, 150 Years Later

Sunday 18 August 2013, by [ANDERSON Kevin B.](#) (Date first published: 21 October 2011).

Marx's dialectic of race and class is related to that of Frantz Fanon and to the Civil War in the U.S., which unleashed many revolutionary possibilities - Editors.

Contents

- [Frantz Fanon: The Dialectics](#)
- [Marx on Ireland: Class, \(...\)](#)
- [France in the 1960s: From \(...\)](#)
- [Marx on the American Civil \(...\)](#)
- [Marx's Critical Support of \(...\)](#)
- [Race, Class and the Civil \(...\)](#)
- [Pre-Civil War Writings on \(...\)](#)
- [Race, Class, and Revolution in](#)
- [Marx's Arguments with Engels](#)
- [Proletarian Internationalism](#)

As the U.S. marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War this year, some attention has been given to African-American resistance to slavery and to the northern radical abolitionists. Increasingly, it is admitted, even in the South, that the Confederacy's supposedly "noble cause" was based upon the defense of slavery. Yet to this day this country continues to deny the race and class dimensions of the war. There is also a denial, sometimes even on the Left, of the war's revolutionary implications, not only for African-Americans, but also for white labor and for the U.S. economic and political system as a whole. And there is still greater ignorance of the fact that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote extensively on the dialectics of race and class in the American Civil War, something I have tried to remedy in my recent book, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*.

Frantz Fanon: The Dialectics of Race, Class, and Revolution

It is a happy coincidence that this year, 2011, is also the 100th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution in China, which targeted both imperialism and indigenous despotism, while supporting democracy and women's liberation. More connected to the topic at hand is a third anniversary this year, the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the great Afro-Caribbean revolutionary and philosopher, Frantz Fanon, who, like Karl Marx, has a lot to say to us today about the dialectics of race and class. Writing as a radical humanist steeped in the works of Hegel and Marx, Fanon sketched a theory of revolutionary violence as both necessary and liberatory when carried out by racially oppressed groups. He did so

on the basis of the experience of one of Africa's most radical liberation struggles, the Algerian revolution. In the 1960s in the U.S., this message of violent revolution sparked fear in some quarters, mainly conservative, and admiration in others, mainly radical, especially in Black communities. In the spirit of those times, which were imbued with Mao Zedong's concept of guerrilla warfare, Fanon's message appealed to groups like the Black Panthers.

At the same time, this focus on Fanon's theory of violence, which constituted only one chapter of his most important book, *Wretched of the Earth*, obscured the overall theme of dialectical humanism in Fanon's work. For in the magnificent conclusion to *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon had called for mutual recognition and solidarity across national and racial lines, between oppressed nations and their former colonizers. He did so in a wonderfully dialectical discussion, where he argued that the newly independent African peoples, long subjected to both economic and racial oppression, needed to develop further their self-consciousness, including pride in their cultures and histories (Fanon was always very critical, however, of patriarchal and other oppressive traditions), which had been so often demeaned by the colonizers. While that appealed to Black nationalists of the time, Fanon argued further in his dialectical presentation that such self-consciousness and self-awareness did not mean looking inward or closing oneself off, either individually or as a people. Instead, he concluded, consciousness of self, what Hegel would have called a particular or singular factor, was what under revolutionary conditions could move us from the particular to the universal of human brotherhood and sisterhood.

Here is how Fanon famously put it, in that beautiful dialectical language with which he concludes *Wretched of the Earth*:

"The consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."

This may be hard to grasp, especially in today's climate on the left – as in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, for example — where all forms of national consciousness tend to be rejected as reactionary.

Marx on Ireland: Class, Ethnicity, and National Liberation

But it is in keeping with Karl Marx's own thinking about race, class, and nationalism. Sometimes, as I have tried to show in *Marx at the Margins*, Marx saw the pathway to class consciousness and to proletarian revolution as not direct but indirect. Take the British workers of the 1860s. As Marx saw it, by the 1860s, they had become so imbued with condescension, actually racism, toward the Irish – both the Irish minority inside the British working class and the people of Ireland itself, then a British colony – that they too often identified with the British ruling classes. As Marx wrote in the "Confidential Communication" of the First International of January 1, 1870:

"In all the big industrial centers in England, there is profound antagonism between the Irish proletarian and the English proletarian. The common English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He views him similarly to how the poor whites of the Southern states of North America viewed black slaves. This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power."

Note his comparison to race relations in the U.S. Was such an impasse – whether in the U.S. or Britain — permanent, a "deep structure," as some radical intellectuals like to say?

Not according to Marx. Marx believed that an Irish revolution liberating that country from colonialism could break the impasse, not only freeing Ireland of British colonialism, but also opening up new possibilities inside Britain itself. Marx made these arguments in the face of strong opposition from the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who attacked the First International's support work for Irish political prisoners as a diversion from the class struggle. In a letter to Engels of Dec. 10, 1869, Marx suggested:

"For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the New York Tribune. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general." (MECW 43: 398)

This aspiration — for a linkage between anti-imperialist movements and the labor movements of the imperialist countries — was crucial during the twentieth century and remains important today.

France in the 1960s: From Support for National Liberation in the Colonies to Social Revolution at Home

An dramatic example of such a linkage is what happened in France in the 1950s and 1960s, after first the Vietnamese and then the Algerians wrested their independence from French colonialism. Inside France, the Left had been defeated in the 1950s and had had to swallow the bitter pill of the authoritarian political system set up by Charles De Gaulle's coup of 1958. But by the 1960s, new networks inside France that supported the Algerian revolution, which were rooted in a new generation and youth and radical intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre, began to blossom. (One example of this was Sartre's preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.) They persisted, even in the face of assassination attempts (including one on Sartre), a type of violence the Algerian immigrant community inside France faced in an even starker fashion. Once Algeria became independent in 1962, France seemed to return to conservative domination for a few years. But in fact, the new mentalities created by the Algerian revolution, as well as the networks of support that had been created for it in France, which helped form a Left considerably to the Left of the reformist and opportunist French Communist Party, played no small role in the explosion of 1968, the most serious revolutionary upsurge in a developed capitalist country since the early 20th century.

(Of course, an uncritical Third Worldism sometimes accompanied these developments; nor were the Algeria support networks the only revolutionary networks that had existed prior to 1968. For here one should mention both *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the Situationist International, but it should also be noted that if one were to collect the writings of either of these 2 groups on Algeria or the anti-colonial movements more generally, that would be a very short pamphlet indeed. Somewhat similar libertarian Marxist currents in the U.S., like those around C.L.R. James or the Marxist-Humanists around Raya Dunayevskaya, the latter of which I have been involved in since the 1970s, did respond seriously to the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, however.)

Marx on the American Civil War: Democratic Aspirations and Economic Reality

During the Civil War in the U.S., Marx penned some of his most significant writings on race and class. Although these writings have received attention in the U.S. ever since W.E.B. Du Bois cited them in his *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, followed soon after by a translation of most of them in the volume *Marx and Engels on the Civil War in the United States* in 1937, unfortunately out of print

today, they have received far less discussion than might have been expected.

Marx viewed the Civil War as a second American revolution, with a socioeconomic as well as a political dimension. He expressed these sentiments in the 1867 preface to Vol. I of *Capital*: “Just as the in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century the American Civil War did the same for the European working class” (Fowkes trans., p. 91). Of course, he saw the Civil War as a bourgeois democratic rather than a communist revolution, but he also believed that it could be the harbinger of that deeper communist revolution in Europe. And as it happened, the Paris Commune, a radical communist revolution, did break out in Europe only a few years after the end of the Civil War.

Also, as Robin Blackburn notes in his recent book, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (2011), in Marx’s view, “Defeating the slave power and freeing the slaves would not destroy capitalism, but it would create conditions far more favorable to organizing and elevating labor, whether white or black” (p. 13). Thus, the war would create new possibilities for American labor, both Black and white.

Blackburn’s book has brought back into print a few of Marx’s Civil War writings as well.

The Civil War had important economic as well as political implications for Marx. A Northern victory would, he noted repeatedly, shore up what was, with all of its limitations, one of the world’s few democratic republics. It would do so not only by defeating the reactionary secessionists of the South, but also by abolishing slavery. The latter measure would result in formal freedom for a substantial part of the U.S. population, making that democracy more of a reality. (And while the vote for women was also posed in the U.S. in the 1860s, sadly, as we know, that was delayed for 60 more years due to a split between proponents of Black male suffrage and feminists.)

We should not forget as well that in 1861, virtually all of Europe was ruled by monarchies or military regimes, and even those countries with strong parliaments, like Britain, had property requirements for voting that disenfranchised the working classes and even large portions of the middle classes. The dominant classes of these societies tended to disparage the U.S. “experiment” with universal [white] male suffrage, sympathizing as well with the Confederacy.

The Civil War also had – Marx wrote — huge economic implications concerning land and property. Given the vast and growing size of the U.S. economy and of the proportion of it based upon slave labor, the emancipation of four million slaves without compensation to their “owners” would mean in economic terms the greatest expropriation of private property in history up to that time.

Another economic aspect concerned landed property in the South. Marx shared the hope of abolitionists and Radical Republicans—and of socialists more generally — that in the occupied South the postwar Reconstruction policies would go beyond the establishment of full political rights for the former slaves and toward a real agrarian revolution that would break up the old slave plantations and redistribute the land. For example, in the 1867 preface to *Capital*, Marx alluded to the Radical Republican program of granting forty acres and a mule to the freed slaves. He did so in a reference to Benjamin Wade, next in line to become President of the United State should the virulently racist and obstructionist Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1865 upon the latter’s assassination, have been successfully impeached by the Radical Republican majority in the Senate: “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” (Fowkes trans., p. 93). This program was shelved the following year, after the Senate’s failure to impeach the reactionary Johnson.

Marx's Critical Support of the North

Marx strongly supported the North, even at the beginning of the war when Lincoln still refused to place the abolition of slavery on the agenda. Despite these deficiencies of the North, Marx noted again and again that the South was utterly reactionary, having put the "right" to own slaves as a founding principle of its Constitution. At the same time, Marx issued strong public criticisms of Lincoln. In an August 30, 1862 article for *Die Presse* in Vienna, Marx attacked Lincoln's refusal to endorse abolition as an aim of the war by quoting at length a speech by radical abolitionist Wendell Phillips. In a widely reported speech in the summer of 1862, Phillips had castigated Lincoln as "first-rate second rate man" who had failed to grasp that the U.S. would "never see peace... until slavery is destroyed."

It should also be noted that when Marx's First International was founded in 1864, this happened in large part on the basis of labor and socialist networks throughout Western Europe that had supported the North. These networks mobilized people on behalf of the North during the crucial early years of the war when Britain and France seemed to threaten intervention on the side of the South. In January 1865, after Lincoln had not only issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but begun to employ Black troops in the Union Army, the International sent a public Address to Lincoln drafted by Marx, congratulating him on his overwhelming victory in the 1864 election. As Marx pointed out privately, this election victory, unlike the one in 1860, amounted to a ringing endorsement of the politics of emancipation. The U.S. government actually established relations of a sort with the International, thus going directly to the working class over the heads of the British government, which remained antagonistic toward the North. Not only did U.S. Minister to Britain Charles Francis Adams agree to receive a 40-member delegation from the International to deliver the address. In addition, after transmitting the Address to Lincoln, on the latter's instructions Adams issued a remarkably warm public reply to the International on behalf of the U.S. government. Adams's official reply stated that "the United States... derive new encouragement to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies" (reprinted in Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution*, pp. 213-14).

The following year though, when Lincoln's successor Johnson started to block citizenship rights for former slaves, the International issued another kind of statement about the legacies of slavery in the U.S. The International's very forceful Address to the American People of September 28, 1865 is a text that unfortunately has received very little attention. It appealed over Johnson's head to the U.S. public. It included an all-too-accurate warning about racism and resistance down the road in the U.S.:

*"Permit us also to add a word of counsel for the future. As injustice to a section of your people has produced such direful results, let that cease. 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.** The eyes of Europe and the world are fixed upon your efforts at reconstruction, and enemies are ever ready to sound the knell of the downfall of republican institutions when the slightest chance is given. We warn you then, as brothers in the common cause, to remove every shackle from freedom's limb, and your victory will be complete."*

Although Marx did not pen this Address, it is very doubtful that he would have disagreed with this statement of the International, in which his political influence was decisive.

Race, Class and the Civil War in *Capital*, Vol. I

The theme of race and class in relation to the specific situation facing labor in the U.S. emerged again and again in Marx's Civil War writings. This theme can also be found in a passage in *Capital* that has also been frequently overlooked:

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." (1976: 414, emphasis added)

This passage was central to the chapter on the "Working Day," where Marx more than anywhere else in *Capital* took up working class resistance. The language above to the effect that "labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" has rightfully drawn the most attention up to now. Fewer have noted the language about combating "capitalistic slavery" in the statement Marx quotes from the first national U.S. labor congress, language that would become much rarer once the trade union movement became more established and bureaucratic.

In addition, as Raya Dunayevskaya has argued in a treatment of Marx's Civil War writings that connects them to his overall critique of political economy, Marx added the chapter on the "Working Day" - and the language quoted above on race and class in the U.S. - in a rather late draft of *Capital*. He did so, Dunayevskaya holds, under the impact of both the Civil War in the U.S. itself and the massive and principled support movement for the North that emerged on the part of British labor (the latter to be discussed below). As Dunayevskaya wrote regarding the impact of the Civil War on the structure of *Capital*, Vol. I, Marx "as a theoretician" was "attuned to the new impulses from the workers," as a result of which he created some new theoretical "categories" (p. 89).

Pre-Civil War Writings on Slavery and Capitalism

Marx had on occasion been discussing race, slavery, and capitalism since even before the Communist Manifesto. In a December 28, 1846 letter to Pavel Annenkov, otherwise famous for its early exposition of his critique of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's version of socialism, Marx connects modern chattel slavery and capitalism:

"Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry.... Slavery is therefore an economic category of paramount importance."

In another critique of Proudhon during this period, Marx attacked the common assumption of the day that Blacks were predestined for slavery. And while he did not publish much on New World slavery until the period of the Civil War in the U.S., there are at least two indications of his intimate knowledge of and sympathy for the abolitionist cause. One of these lay in the fact that during the 1850s, Marx was the chief European correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, an abolitionist

newspaper that he seems to have read most assiduously.

The second indication of his preoccupation slavery can be found in Marx's private research notebooks, which have begun to be published only in recent decades, in the ongoing Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe or MEGA (Complete Writings). Among the notebooks that have already been published in the MEGA are excerpts and summaries in a mixture of German and English of two books on slavery by the noted British abolitionist Thomas Buxton. In August-September 1851, Marx read and annotated Buxton's *The African Slave Trade* (1839) and *The Remedy; Being a Sequel to the African Slave Trade* (1840). Marx gave great emphasis in his notes to Buxton's conclusion that, despite Britain's having abolished first the slave trade (1807) and then slavery itself (1833), the Atlantic slave trade had actually expanded. Marx took up in great detail Buxton's figures concerning the massive rate of death during the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, including passages like the following: "the mortality consequent on the cruelties of the system has increased in proportion to the increase of the traffic, which doubled in amount when compared to the period before 1790" (MEGA IV/9, p. 496).

This was because, as Marx's notes from Buxton also suggest, once the British Navy was actively stopping slave ships, the trade went underground without actually diminishing in terms of the numbers of human beings that were being transported into slavery: "Hitherto we have effected no other change than a change in the flag under which the trade is carried on" (MEGA IV/9, p. 497). Moreover, the conditions on slave ships had, if possible, grown worse:

"The slaves are now subjected to greater hardships in their being landed and concealed as smuggled goods than they were in former times, when a slave vessel entered the ports of Rio [de] Janeiro and Havana as a fair trader, and openly disposed of her cargo. Twice as many human beings are now the victims of the slave trade as when [the abolitionists] Wilberforce and Clarkson entered upon their noble task; and each individual of this increased number, in addition to the horrors which were endured in former times, has to suffer from being cribbed up in a narrower space, and on board of a vessel, where accommodation is sacrificed to speed." (MEGA IV/9, p. 497)

Marx's attention to detail here shows not only his moral outrage against slavery, but also his growing conviction that slavery was at the time a major feature of global capitalism.

In these notes, Marx also takes up Buxton's discussion of the awful effects of the slave trade upon West African societies, where the trade dominated both the economy and the political order. As petty African chiefs and kings told the European slavers: "We want three things, viz. powder, ball, and brandy; and we have three things to sell, viz. men, women and children" (MEGA IV/9, p. 499). Marx seems to endorse Buxton's view that only if Africa could be allowed to undergo a different type of economic development - taking advantage of its rich soil - could the deleterious effects of slavery inside West Africa begin to be overcome.

Race, Class, and Revolution in the U.S. South

A striking example of Marx's discussion of race, class, and revolution inside the South is found in a letter to Engels that preceded the outbreak of the Civil War. Writing on January 11, 1860, in the aftermath of the abolitionist John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, Virginia a few weeks earlier, Marx intoned:

"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". (MECW 41, p. 4)

Brown's expedition, which included other abolitionists, both Black and white, was an attempt to foment a slave uprising in the Harper's Ferry area.

Marx wrote as well of the political and social consciousness of those whom he termed the "poor whites" of the South, noting that only 300,000 out of 5 million Southern whites actually owned slaves. As the Southern states voted to secede in 1861, touching off the Civil War, he reported on how the votes at secession conventions showed that large numbers of the poor whites did not initially support secession. In an October 25, 1861 article, "The North American Civil War," Marx compared the poor whites of the South to the plebeians of ancient Rome, whose class antagonism toward the patrician aristocracy had been tempered by gains the plebeians received from Roman conquests. Referring to the South's drive for expansion into new territories where slave labor would predominate, as seen in the Mexican War of 1846, he argued that a similar process was unfolding in the U.S.:

"The number of actual slaveholders in the South of the Union does not amount to more than three hundred thousand, a narrow oligarchy that is confronted with many millions of so-called poor whites, whose numbers have been constantly growing through concentration of landed property and whose condition is only to be compared with that of the Roman plebeians in the period of Rome's extreme decline. Only by acquisition and the prospect of acquisition of new Territories, as well as by filibustering expeditions, is it possible to square the interests of these poor whites with those of the slaveholders, to give their restless thirst for action a harmless direction and to tame them with the prospect of one day becoming slaveholders themselves." (MECW 19: 40-41)

As August Nimtz writes in his *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America* (2003), "The forcible incorporation of Northern Mexico into the United States was clearly on Marx's mind. He sought to explain the material basis for what would later be called the false consciousness of poor antebellum Southern whites, thus offering insights into the establishment and maintenance of ideological hegemony" (2003: 94). The need to create new slave states had driven the South to secede in 1861, Marx argued, because Lincoln's opposition to the creation of new slave states, even though he had not yet advocated abolition of slavery in the present slave states, was a serious threat to the South's future in the sense discussed above.

But Marx's concern was not only the explanation of false consciousness. He was also examining the possibility of a new form of revolutionary subjectivity that could emerge from the depths of the social system of the South, something that the dominant classes had worked relentlessly to prevent for hundreds of years: the potential for an alliance between poor whites and enslaved Blacks. The war itself might overturn old social relations within the South, allowing such social contradictions to come to the surface.

Marx's Arguments with Engels and Lassalle

As Marx saw it, the Civil War would open up revolutionary possibilities for the North as well. As discussed above, he wrote in *Capital* of the birth of a national labor movement in the wake of the war. In addition, as much as Lincoln tried to temporize around the issue of slavery, from the beginning of the war Marx wrote with supreme confidence that the logic of events would over time force the North to support not only the abolition of slavery, but also Black troops in its army, and full civil rights for the former slaves. In this sense, the Northern cause was as a whole progressive and revolutionary from the beginning, at least implicitly.

Engels, for his part, was more sanguine about the North's possibilities for victory, let alone the chances of its adopting any revolutionary policies. Here, he seems to have shared, at least to some extent, the views of European socialists like Ferdinand Lassalle – a frequent butt of Marx's withering critiques, which characterized Lassalle as a state socialist, or worse – to the effect that the North lacked both revolutionary radicalism and a real will to fight. This meant that the South might well triumph in the war, due to the North's indecision as contrasted with the South's clear will to fight to defend its reactionary institution. In his arguments with Marx, Engels also pointed to the Southern officer corps' greater military experience, given the fact that most of the U.S. national officer corps had defected to the South. This debate, which continued for several years in the correspondence between Marx and Engels, was to my knowledge the most explicit political difference to be found in their forty-year relationship. It was during one of his arguments with Engels that Marx predicted, in a letter of August 7, 1862, that "the North will finally wage war seriously, adopt revolutionary methods" and that this would include the use of Black troops, which "would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves." [1]

Proletarian Internationalism: British Workers and the American Civil War

A large portion of Marx's Civil War writings took up what he referred to in the *Inaugural Address to the First International* as the need for the working classes to "master for themselves the mysteries of international politics," part of what later Marxists would call proletarian internationalism. From the war's inception, a British or French intervention on the side of the South was feared, something that would have gone a long way toward assuring a Southern victory. As Marx and other socialists and trade unionists saw it, conservative forces, especially those based in the landowning aristocracy, were attempting to whip up popular sentiment against the North. These conservative voices noted that the North's blockade of Southern ports, which prevented cotton exports, was causing huge economic hardship among the textile workers of Manchester and other industrial centers.

In "English Public Opinion," a *New York Tribune* article of January 11, 1862, Marx described how the British and Irish working classes of were refusing to embrace the war cries of the British Establishment, even after the U.S. Navy had forcibly boarded a British ship, detaining two Confederate diplomats who had been on their way to London:

"Even at Manchester, the temper of the working classes was so well understood that an insulated attempt at the convocation of a war meeting was almost as soon abandoned as thought of.... Wherever public meetings took place in England, Scotland, or Ireland, they protested against the rabid war-cries of the press, against the sinister designs of the Government, and declared for a pacific settlement of the pending question.... When a great portion of the British working classes directly and severely suffers under the consequences of the Southern blockade; when another part is indirectly smitten by the curtailment of the American commerce, owing, as they are told, to the selfish "protective policy" of the [U.S.] Republicans; ...under such circumstances, simple justice requires to pay a tribute to the sound attitude of the British working classes, the more so when contrasted with the hypocritical, bullying, cowardly, and stupid conduct of the official and well-to-do John Bull."

Repeatedly, Marx published articles on large public meetings by British workers to support the Northern cause, even at the cost of loss of jobs at home in the short run. This constituted one of the finest examples up to that time – and since — of proletarian internationalism.

As mentioned earlier, these meetings to support the North in the war were crucial in forming the networks out of which the First International emerged. Marx summed up this story succinctly in a

letter of November 29, 1864 to Lion Philips. He discussed how networks in the European labor movement that had supported the North – and later ones supporting the Polish insurrection of 1863 – had coalesced in the fall of 1864 to form the First International:

In September the Parisian workers sent a delegation to the London workers to demonstrate support for Poland. On that occasion, an international Workers' Committee was formed. The matter is not without importance because... in London the same people are at the head who... by their monster meeting with [British Liberal leader John] Bright in St. James's Hall, prevented war with the United States. (MECW 42: 47)

The meeting at St. James Hall, also the locale of the founding meeting of the First International, was where British workers and other supporters of the North had gathered to denounce yet another series of bellicose statements toward the U.S. government by the dominant classes.

Given this history, it was quite natural that, aside from the "Inaugural Address" drafted by Marx outlining its general principles, the newly formed First International's first public statement was an open letter congratulating Lincoln on his re-election. In that letter of January 1865, already discussed above in terms of the Lincoln administration's response, the newly formed First International made explicit the internationalist principles that had motivated British workers to support the North in the face of economic hardship: "From the commencement of the titanic American strife the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class.... Everywhere they bore therefore patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the proslavery intervention of their betters – and, from most parts of Europe, contributed their quota of blood to the good cause" (MECW 20: 19-20). This refers both to the fact that the U.S. was the largest democratic republic at that time, and also to the large number of European immigrants, especially Germans, who took part in the war, sometimes in command positions. The surprisingly warm response of the Lincoln administration, quoted earlier, generated for the International its first substantial publicity in the British press.

Civil War America was a society imbued with lots of revolutionary impulses. Among other things, this sparked the growth of a large branch of the First International in the postwar U.S., among whose members were the radical abolitionist Wendell Phillips, the only abolitionist leader who made the transition from abolitionism to supporting labor in the Reconstruction era. And as we know, reactionary forces, not only in the South, but also big capital in the North, worked together to limit the scope of Reconstruction, making sure, for example, that 40 acres and a mule was never achieved for the former slaves. And by 1876, despite the hopes unleashed during the Reconstruction Era, now dashed, a new order of racial oppression, marked by forced segregation and violent repression, had come into place in the South. And as we know, this system survived for nearly another century, until the 1960s.

I would like to end on a more general note, however, concerning Marx's overall perspectives on race, ethnicity, and nationalism, and how they fit into his dialectical framework as a whole and his overall critique of capital, by quoting from the conclusion to my Marx at the Margins: "Marx developed a dialectical theory of social change that was neither unilinear nor exclusively class-based. Just as his theory of social development evolved in a more multilinear direction, so his theory of revolution began over time to concentrate increasingly on the intersectionality of class with ethnicity, race, and nationalism. To be sure, Marx was not a philosopher of difference in the postmodernist sense, for the critique of a single overarching entity, capital, was at the center of his entire intellectual enterprise. But centrality did not mean univocality or exclusivity. Marx's mature social theory revolved around a concept of totality that not only offered considerable scope for particularity and difference, but also on occasion made those particulars – race, ethnicity, or nationality – determinants for the totality" (p. 244).

P.S.

* OCTOBER 21, 2011 |

<http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/dialectics-race-class-marxs-civil-war-writings-150-years-kevin-anderson>

* This article is based on talks in September and October 2011 at Loyola University Chicago, the Niebyl-Proctor Marxist Library in Oakland, the Brecht Forum in New York, and the West Coast Marxist-Humanists in Los Angeles.

Footnotes

[1] In this letter, the term Marx actually used was “nigger-regiment,” employing the n-word in English in the middle of a letter written otherwise in German. Here, he seems to have been using a very racist term (widely recognized as such even at the time) as part of what amounted to a very strong anti-racist point. Such uses of the n-word crop up a few other times in Marx’s writings, including in published articles. In only one instance, however, does he seem to have used the n-word as an actual term of abuse. He did so in an attack on Lassalle’s attitude toward the Civil War: In a letter to Engels of July 30, 1862 Marx referred to the somewhat dark-skinned (although this was also true of Marx himself) Lassalle using the n-word, this as part of a denunciation of Lassalle’s condescending attitude toward the Northern cause.