

Marx and the Politics of Emancipation

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In the first part of the 1860s, Karl Marx's journalistic and scholarly interest in diplomacy and international politics drove him to focus his attention towards two prominent historical events. The first was the outbreak of the American Civil War, when seven slaveholding states declared their secession from the United States. The second was the uprising of the Polish people against Russian occupation. Marx's analysis of these historic episodes also influenced his political efforts through the International Working Men's Association. How Marx's studies of both these events were relevant for his theoretical development and his political engagement is examined.

In the spring of 1861, world politics was shaken by the outbreak of the American Civil War. It began shortly after Abraham Lincoln's election as President, when seven slaveholding states declared their secession from the United States (us): South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. They were joined by Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and, later on, Missouri and Kentucky (although the latter two did not officially proclaim their separation). The ensuing bloody conflict claimed approximately 750,000 lives among the Confederacy (which favoured maintaining and extending slavery) and the Union (the states loyal to Lincoln, though in some cases considering slavery legal).

Karl Marx immediately set about studying the situation and, at the beginning of July, wrote to Friedrich Engels:

The conflict between South and North ... has at last been brought to a head (if we disregard the effrontery of "chivalry's" fresh demands) by the weight which the extraordinary development of the North-Western States has thrown into the scales. (Marx 1985c)

In Marx's view, none of the components of the secessionist movement had any legitimacy; they were to be regarded as "usurpations," since "nowhere did they allow the people en masse to vote." In any case, what was at issue was not only "secession from the North, but also consolidating and intensifying the oligarchy of the 3,00,000 slave lords in the South" (Marx 1985c).² A few days later, he observed that "the secession business [had been] wrongly represented in the English papers," since everywhere, with the exception of South Carolina, "there was the strongest opposition to secession" (Marx 1985c). Moreover, in places where an electoral consultation was allowed—"only a few" of the states on the Gulf of Mexico held a "proper popular vote"—it took place in reprehensible conditions. In Virginia, for instance, "a huge mass of Confederate troops was suddenly pitched into the territory" and "under their protection (truly Bonapartist, this), it voted for secession"—yet there were "50,000 votes" for the Union, "despite the systematic terrorism." Texas, which, "after South Carolina, [had] the largest slave party and terrorism," still recorded "11,000 votes for Union." In Alabama, there was "no popular vote either on secession or on the new Constitution," and the 61–39 majority of convention delegates in favour of secession was only due to the fact that under the Constitution "each slaveholder also votes for 3/5 of his slaves" (Marx 1985c). As for Louisiana, more Union votes than secession votes were cast at "the election for delegates to the convention," but enough delegates defected to change the balance (Marx 1985c).

Such considerations in Marx's letters to Engels were complemented by even more important arguments in his journalistic

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pieces. In addition to sporadic contributions to the *New-York Tribune*, he began in October 1861 to write also for the liberal Viennese daily *Die Presse*, which, with its 30,000 subscribers, was the most widely read paper in Austria and one of the most popular anywhere in the German language. The main theme of these articles, which also included reports on the second French invasion of Mexico, was the economic effects of the American war on Britain. In particular, Marx focused on the development of trade and the financial situation, as well as assessing trends in public opinion. Thus, in “A London Workers’ Meeting” (1862), he expressed pleasure at the demonstrations organised by English workers, who, though “not represented in Parliament,” had managed to bring their “political influence” (Marx 1984d) to bear and prevented a British military intervention against the Union.

Similarly, Marx wrote an impassioned article for the *New-York Tribune* following the Trent Affair, when the US Navy illegally arrested two Confederate diplomats on board a British ship. The US, he wrote, should never forget “that at least the working classes of England (had) never forsaken” it. To them it was due “that, despite the poisonous stimulants daily administered by a venal and reckless press, not one single public war meeting could be held in the United Kingdom during all the period that peace trembled in the balance” (Marx 1984c). The “attitude of the British working classes” was all the more to be valued when placed alongside “the hypocritical, bullying, cowardly and stupid conduct of the official and well-to-do John Bull”; boldness and consistency on one side, incoherence and self-contradiction on the other. In a letter he wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle in May 1861, he commented:

The whole of the official press in England is, of course, in favour of the slaveholders. They are the selfsame fellows who have wearied the world with their antislave trade philanthropy. But cotton, cotton! (Marx 1985c)

Marx’s interest in the Civil War went far beyond its consequences for Britain; he wanted, above all else, to illuminate the nature of the conflict. The article he wrote for the *New-York Tribune* a few months after it broke out is a good example of this:

The people of Europe know that a fight for the continuance of the Union is a fight against the continuance of the slaveocracy—that in this contest the highest form of popular self-government till now realized is giving battle to the meanest and most shameless form of man’s enslaving recorded in the annals of history. (Marx 1984a)

In some of the articles for *Die Presse*, Marx analysed in greater depth the arguments of the two opposing sides. He began by demonstrating the hypocrisy of the English Liberals and Conservatives. In “The North American Civil War” (25 October 1861), he ridiculed the “brilliant discovery” of the *Times*, then the leading British daily, that it was “a mere tariff war, a war between a protectionist system and a free trade system,” and its conclusion that Britain had no choice but to declare its support for the “free trade” represented by the Southern Confederacy. Some weeklies, including the *Economist* and *Saturday Review*, went a step further and insisted that

“the question of slavery ... had absolutely nothing to do with this war” (Marx 1984b).

For Slavery

In opposing these interpretations, Marx drew attention to the political motives behind the conflict. On the slave owners of the South, he remarked that their key aim was to maintain control of the Senate and hold “political sway over the United States.” For this, it was necessary to conquer new regions (as had happened in 1845 with the annexation of Texas) or to transform existing parts of the US into “slave states” (Marx 1984b). The upholders of slavery in America were “a narrow oligarchy that [was] confronted with many millions of so-called poor whites, whose numbers ha[d] been constantly growing through concentration of landed property and whose condition [was] only to be compared with that of the Roman plebeians in the period of Rome’s extreme decline” (Marx 1984b). Therefore, the “acquisition and the prospect of acquisition of new territories” was the only possible way to square the interests of the poor with those of the slave owners, “to give their restless thirst for action a harmless direction and to tame them with the prospect of one day becoming slaveholders themselves.” On the other hand, Lincoln pursued the aim of “strict confinement of slavery within its old terrain,” which “was bound according to economic law to lead to its gradual extinction” and therefore to annihilation of the political “hegemony” of the “slave states” (Marx 1984b).

Marx used his article to argue the opposite:

The whole movement was and is based, as one sees, on the slave question. Not in the sense of whether the slaves within the existing slave states should be emancipated outright or not, but whether the 20 million free men of the North should submit any longer to an oligarchy of 3,00,000 slaveholders. (Marx 1984b)

What was at stake—and Marx based this on his insight into the expansionist mechanism of this economic form—was “whether the vast Territories of the republic should be nurseries for free states or for slavery; [and] whether the national policy of the Union should take armed spreading of slavery in Mexico, Central and South America as its device” (Marx 1984b).

These assessments highlight the abyss separating Marx from Giuseppe Garibaldi, who had rejected the offer of a command post in the Northern Army on the grounds that it was only a power struggle that did not concern the emancipation of the slaves. Regarding Garibaldi’s position and his failed attempt to restore peace between the two sides, Marx commented to Engels: “Garibaldi, the jackass, has made a fool of himself with his letter to the Yankees promoting harmony” (Marx 1985c). Whereas Garibaldi failed to understand the true objectives or options in the process then underway, Marx—as a non-maximalist alert to the possible historical developments—immediately perceived that the outcome of the American Civil War would be decisive on a world scale and set the clock of history moving along the path either of slavery or of emancipation.

In November 1864, faced with the swift and dramatic unfolding of events, Marx asked his uncle Lion Philips to

reflect “how at the time of Lincoln’s election [in 1860] it was only a matter of making no further concessions to the slave-owners, whereas now the avowed aim, which has in part already been realised, is the abolition of slavery.” And he added: “One has to admit that never has such a gigantic revolution occurred with such rapidity. It will have a highly beneficial influence on the whole world” (Marx 1987).

Lincoln’s re-election in November 1864 offered Marx an occasion to express, on behalf of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA), a congratulatory message with a clear political significance: “If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant warcry of your re-election is, Death to Slavery” (Marx 1985a).

Some representatives of the Southern ruling classes had declared that “slavery [was] a beneficent institution,” and even preached that it was “the only solution of the great problem of ‘the relation of labour to capital.’”³ Hence Marx’s eagerness to set things straight:

The working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slave-holders’ rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labour, and that for the men of labour, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. (Marx 1985a)

Marx then addressed a no less important matter:

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 labourer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labour or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation. (Marx 1985a)

A very similar point is made in volume one of *Capital*, where Marx forcefully underlines that “in the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour 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 agitation” for an eight-hour day (Marx 1976).

Marx was well aware of Lincoln’s moderate political positions,⁴ nor did he cover over the racial prejudices of some of his allies. But he always clearly stressed, without any sectarianism, the differences between the slave system in the South and the system based on wage labour in the North. He understood that, in the us, the conditions were developing to demolish one of the world’s most infamous institutions. The end of slavery and racial oppression would enable the global workers’ movement to operate in a more propitious framework for the construction of a classless society and a communist mode of production. With this in mind, Marx composed the “Address from the Working Men’s International Association to President Johnson,” who had succeeded Lincoln after his assassination on 14 April 1865. Marx wanted to remind Andrew Johnson that, with the presidency, he had received “the task to uproot by the law what ha[d] been felled by the sword”: that is, “to preside over the arduous work of political reconstruction and

social regeneration ...; to initiate the new era of the emancipation of labour” (Marx 1985b).

A few years later, Marx sent on behalf of the IWMA an “Address to the National Labor Union of the United States” (1869). He was well aware—he wrote—that “the suffering of the working classes set off as a foil the newfangled luxury of financial aristocrats ... and similar vermin bred by wars” (Marx 2014). However, it should not be forgotten that “the Civil War did compensate by freeing the slave and the consequent moral impetus.” “On you,” he concluded, “depends the glorious task to prove to the world that now at last the working classes are bestriding the scene of history no longer as servile retainers but as independent actors, conscious of their own responsibility” (Marx 2014).

Polish Revolution and Russia’s Reactionary Role

As to the fine analytic contributions that Marx wrote for *Die Presse*, only a part of them were ever published. In February 1862, he wrote to Engels that, “in view of the present rotten state of affairs in Germany,” the Viennese daily had not proved to be the “milch-cow it should have been” to shore up his wretched finances. The “fellows” had perhaps printed only “one in four,” so not only had he failed to earn enough to ease his family’s circumstances, he had also suffered “loss of time” and the annoyance of “having to write on spec, whether or no the gracious editorial board condescend[ed] to accord the article its *imprimatur*” (Marx 1985c). Marx repeated the point in April, in a sarcastic comment he sent to Engels: “In his *New Science*, Vico says that Germany is the only country in Europe where an ‘heroic tongue’ is still spoken. Had he had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with the Vienna *Presse* or the Berlin *National-Zeitung*, the old Neapolitan would have abandoned this preconceived idea” (Marx 1985c). Towards the end of 1862, Marx decided to break off his collaboration with the Austrian paper. In the space of a little over a year, he had managed to publish a total of 52 articles, some of them written with Engels’s help.

Although the events shaking the us were Marx’s main pre-occupation in international politics, he also, in the first part of the 1860s, followed with his usual interest all the main developments in Russia and Eastern Europe. In a letter of June 1860 to Lassalle, Marx made some points regarding one of his chief political focuses: his opposition to Russia and its allies Henry Palmerston and Louis Bonaparte. He tried to convince Lassalle that there was nothing illegitimate in the convergence between the positions of their “party” and those of David Urquhart, a Tory politician with romantic views. Concerning Urquhart—who had had the audacity to republish, for anti-Russian and anti-liberal purposes, Marx’s articles against Palmerston that had appeared in the official organ of the English Chartists in the early 1850s (Marx 1979)—he wrote: “He is ... subjectively reactionary ... this in no way precludes the movement in foreign policy, of which he is the head, from being objectively revolutionary. [... It] is to me a matter of complete indifference, just as in a war against Russia, say, it would be a matter of indifference to you whether, in firing on the Russians, the

motives of your neighbour in the firing-line were black, red and gold [that is, nationalist] or revolutionary”.⁵ Marx continued: “It goes without saying that, in foreign policy, there’s little to be gained by using such catchwords as ‘reactionary’ and ‘revolutionary’” (Marx 1985c).

Ever on the lookout for signs of a revolt that might limit Russia’s reactionary role in European politics, Marx wrote to Engels in early 1863 (soon after the Polish January uprising and Bismarck’s immediate offer of help in suppressing it) that “the era of revolution ha[d] now fairly opened in Europe once more” (Marx 1985c). And four days later, he reflected: “The Polish business and Prussia’s intervention do indeed represent a combination that impels us to speak” (Marx 1985c).

Given the importance of these events, Marx did not think it sufficient for them to speak out only through published articles. He therefore suggested the immediate issuing of a manifesto in the name of the German Workers’ Educational Association in London, which remained close to his political positions. This would give him cover in case he proceeded with the idea of applying for German citizenship and “returning to Germany.” Engels was supposed to write the “military bit” of this little text, focusing on “Germany’s military and political interest in the restoration of Poland,” while he would take on the “diplomatic bit” (Marx 1985c). When, on 18 February 1863, the Prussian Chamber of Deputies condemned government policy and passed a resolution in favour of neutrality, Marx boomed with enthusiasm: “We shall soon have revolution” (Marx 1985c). As he saw it, the Polish question offered “further occasion for proving that it is impossible to prosecute German interests so long as the Hohenzollerns’ own state continues to exist” (Marx 1985c).⁶ Bismarck’s offer of support to Tsar Alexander II, or his authorisation for “Prussia to treat its [Poland’s] territory as Russian” (Marx 1981) gave Marx a further political motivation to complete his plan.

It was in this period, therefore, that Marx embarked on another of his thorough research projects. In a letter he sent to Engels in late May, he reported that in the previous months—apart from political economy—he had been studying aspects of the Polish question; this had enabled him to “fill in the gaps in [his] knowledge (diplomatic, historical) of the Russian-Prussian-Polish affair” (Marx 1985c). Thus, between February and May, he had written a manuscript entitled “Poland, Prussia and Russia” (1863), which well documented Berlin’s historical subjection to Moscow. For the Hohenzollerns, “the progress of Russia represent[ed] Prussia’s law of development”; “there [was] no Prussia without Russia.” For Marx, on the contrary, “the restoration of Poland mean[t] annihilation of today’s Russia, cancellation of its bid for global hegemony” (Marx 1981). For the same reason, “the annihilation of Poland, its passing for good to Russia, [would mean] the certain decline of Germany, the collapse of the only dam holding back the universal Slav deluge” (Marx 1981). The planned text never saw the light of day. On this occasion, the responsibility clearly lay with Engels (who was to have written the most substantial part, on military aspects), whereas Marx’s “diplomatic bit,” which he was “ready to do at any time,” was to be “only an

appendix” (Marx 1985c). In October, however, Marx managed to publish a “Proclamation on Poland by the German Workers’ Educational Society in London” (1863), which helped to raise funds for the Polish freedom fighters. It began with a resounding statement: “The Polish question is the German question. Without an independent Poland there can be no independent and united Germany, no emancipation of Germany from the Russian domination that began with the first partition of Poland” (Marx 1984e). For Marx, whereas “the German bourgeoisie look[ed] on, silent, passive and indifferent, at the slaughter of the heroic nation which alone still shield[ed] Germany from the Muscovite deluge,” the “English working class,” “which ha[d] won immortal historical honour for itself by thwarting the repeated attempts of the ruling classes to intervene on behalf of the American slaveholders,” would continue to struggle alongside the Polish insurgents (Marx 1984e).

This struggle, which lasted for more than a year, was the longest ever waged against the Russian occupation; it came to an end only in April 1864, when the Russians, having executed the representatives of the revolutionary government, finally crushed the revolt. In May, Russian troops also completed the annexation of the northern Caucasus, bringing to an end a war that had begun in 1817. Once again, Marx displayed great insight, and unlike “the rest of Europe”—which “watched with idiotic indifference”—he regarded “the suppression of the Polish insurrection and the annexation of the Caucasus” as “the two most important events to have taken place in Europe since 1815” (Marx 1985c).

Support for Polish Struggle

Marx continued to occupy himself with the Polish question, which came up for debate several times within the International. Actually, the most significant preparatory meeting of the foundation of the International happened in July 1863 and was organised because a number of French and English workers’ organisations had met in London specifically to express solidarity with the Polish people against Tsarist occupation.

Later, three months after the birth of the International, at a meeting of the Standing Committee of the General Council held in December 1864, the journalist Peter Fox argued in his address on Poland that “the French [had been] traditionally more sympathetic [to the Poles] than the English.” Marx had not disputed this, but, as he wrote to Engels, he had then “unfolded a historically irrefutable tableau of the constant French betrayal of Poland from Louis xv to Bonaparte III.” It was in this context that he drafted a new manuscript, which later came to be known as “Poland and France” (1864). Written in English, it covered the time span from the Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, to 1812.

One year later, in September 1865, just after the Conference of the International held in London, Marx proposed a draft agenda for the foreign policy of the labour movement in Europe. As one of its priorities, he indicated to Hermann Jung “the need to eliminate Muscovite influence in Europe by applying the right of self-determination of nations, and

the re-establishment of the Poland upon a democratic and social basis" (Marx 1987: 400). It took many decades for this to happen.

Marx continued to support the Polish cause also after the dissolution of the International. In autumn 1875, he was asked to speak at a meeting on the liberation of Poland but he had to decline because of his bad state of health. In the letter explaining his absence that he sent to the publicist and political activist Pyotr Lavrov, he made it clear that, if he had given a speech,

he could only have reaffirmed the position he had held for more than 30 years—that "the emancipation of Poland is one of the preconditions for the emancipation of the working class in Europe" (Marx 1991: 111).

The case of Poland demonstrates that Marx, when faced with major historical events in various distant places, was able to grasp what was happening in the world and to contribute to its transformation. This internationalist perspective urgently needs to be revived by leftist movements today.

NOTES

- 1 The name that Marx used to refer to the Southern plantation owners.
- 2 K Marx to F Engels, 1 July 1861, in MECW, Vol 41, p 300. The 1860 Census, with which Marx was not familiar at the time of writing, recorded a little over 3,94,000 slaveowners, or 8% of American families. The number of slaves, however, totalled 39,50,000. See United States Census Office (1866).
- 3 Marx was quoting here from the speech by slaveholder A Stephens in Savannah, on 21 March 1861, which was published in the *New York Daily Tribune* on 27 March 1861.
- 4 On the differences between the two, see also the recent work: A Kulikoff, *Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- 5 K Marx to F Lassalle, 1 or 2 June 1860, in MECW, Vol 41, pp 152–53. Among the numerous studies dedicated to Marx's political conception of Russia, see Dawid Rjasanow (1909) and Bernd Rabehl (1977).
- 6 K Marx to F Engels, 24 March 1863, MECW, Vol 41, p 462.

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