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# What Marx Understood About Slavery

By

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Marx, like generations of socialists, saw the particularly capitalist character of the New World's slavery — and the inextricable link between the emancipation of the enslaved and the liberation of the entire working class.

This year marks the [400th anniversary](#) of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia. Although this grim event is now being discussed in profound and penetrating ways, few in the mainstream media are noting the particularly capitalist character of the New World's modern form of slavery — a theme that runs through [Marx's](#) critique of capital and his [extensive discussions](#) of capitalism and slavery.

Marx did not view the large-scale enslavement of Africans by Europeans, which began in the early sixteenth century in the Caribbean, as a repeat of Roman or Arab slavery, but as something new. It combined ancient forms of brutality with the quintessentially modern social form of value production. Slavery, he wrote in a draft for *Capital*, reaches “its most hateful form ... in a situation of capitalist production,” where “exchange value becomes the determining element of production.” This leads to the extension of the workday beyond all limit, literally working enslaved people to death.

Whether in South America, the Caribbean, or the plantations of the southern United States, [slavery](#) was not a peripheral but a central part of modern capitalism. As the young Marx theorized this relationship in 1846 in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, two years before the *Communist Manifesto*:

“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 that has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies that 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.”

Such linkages between capitalism and slavery permeated the whole of Marx's [writings](#). But he also considered how various forms of resistance to slavery could contribute to anticapitalist resistance. This was especially the case before and during the US Civil War, when he fervently supported the anti-slavery cause.

One form of resistance Marx considered was that of enslaved African Americans. For example, he took very seriously the epochal 1859 attack on an arsenal at Harper's Ferry by anti-slavery militants, both black and white, under the command of radical abolitionist [John Brown](#). While the attack failed to touch off the slave insurrection the militants had hoped for, Marx agreed with other abolitionists that it was a momentous event, after which there would be no going back. But he added both an international comparison to Russian peasants and a stress on the self-activity of enslaved African Americans, on their ongoing potential for mass insurrection:

"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."

At this juncture, Marx seemed to perceive a mass slave insurrection as the key to abolition, and perhaps something more in terms of challenging the capitalist order itself. Soon after, as the South seceded and the Civil War broke out, he turned his support to the Northern cause, albeit with searing attacks on [Lincoln](#) for his initial hesitancy to advocate, let alone enact, either the abolition of slavery or the enlistment of black troops.

During the war, a second form of resistance to capitalism and slavery emerged, not in the United States, but in Britain. While that country's dominant classes ridiculed the United States as a failed experiment in republican government and even attacked the plebeian Lincoln as uncouth, the British working classes saw things differently. Still battling for the franchise in the face of steep property qualifications, the workers saw the United States as the widest form of democracy that existed at the time, especially after the North committed itself to abolition.

As Marx [reported in several articles](#), mass meetings organized by British workers helped to block government attempts to intervene on the side of the South. In this magnificent example of proletarian internationalism, British workers rejected attempts by various politicians to foment animosity toward the North on the basis that Union blockades had curtailed cotton supplies, thus creating mass unemployment among the textile workers of Lancashire. As Marx intoned in an 1862 article for the *New York Tribune*,

"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 [US] 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.”

By 1864, the First International had been formed, with many of its early activists drawn from among the organizers these anti-slavery meetings. In this sense, a working-class anti-slavery movement helped to form the largest socialist organization that Marx was to lead during his lifetime.

Once the war was over, Radical [Reconstruction](#) was [on the agenda](#) in the United States, including the prospect of dividing up the former slave plantations in favor of grants of forty acres and a mule to formerly enslaved people. In the 1867 preface to *Capital*, Marx [celebrated](#) these developments: “After the abolition of slavery, a radical transformation in the existing relations of capital and landed property is on the agenda.” This was not to be, as the measure was blocked by moderate forces in the US Congress.

In the wake of the Civil War, Marx discussed a third form of resistance to capitalism and slavery, but also to racism, again inside the United States. As he saw it, centuries of black slave labor alongside formally free white labor had created huge divisions among the working people, both urban and rural. The Civil War had swept away some of the economic basis for those divisions, creating new possibilities. Again in *Capital*, he discussed these possibilities with evident relish, also penning his most notable line about the dialectics of race and class, here italicized:

“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.’”

To be sure, the trade union leaders of 1866 were willing to target capitalism directly, something not seen very often afterwards in the United States. However, Marx’s dream of cross-racial class solidarity was not achieved at that time, due to a reluctance to include black workers as full members on the part the white trade unions. The kind of cross-racial solidarity Marx envisioned has emerged a few times since then on a large scale, most notably in the mass unionization drives of the 1930s.

Four hundred years after enslaved Africans first arrived in Virginia, African Americans continue to experience [the legacy of slavery](#) in conditions of mass incarceration, institutionalized racism in both housing and employment, and a growing wealth gap.

At the same time, we are faced with the most reactionary, anti-labor administration in our history, an administration that foments and feeds upon the foulest racism and misogyny to gain support among sections of the middle and working classes. In this light, Marx's declaration, "Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin," remains a motto that is as relevant today as it was 150 years ago.