

Until We Are All Abolitionists: Marx on Slavery, Race, and Class

Salome Lee

October 22, 2011

Marx's writings on slavery, race, and class in relation to capital are examined in light of critics who paint him as a class reductionist with little awareness of or sensitivity to race –
Editors

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Racialized Slavery

Contrary to the pseudoscientific racist justifications of slavery prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, Karl Marx understood that slave status was a condition branded from without rather than a predisposition existing within. In the period of anthropology and ethnology's rise, Marx was far ahead of his time in asserting that slave status was not a natural phenomenon biologically proscribed by one's race. Marx took great care to intricately unravel the strands of how racialized slavery contrasted with wage slavery, how it came to be, and why its racialization was another form of similar kinds of weapons used against the unification of the working class.

On the contrast between labor systems, Marx explained that although wage laborers and their labor were also commodified, wage laborers existed as variable capital, and their labor in concrete or abstract forms. In contrast, “the slave-owner buys his laborer [slaves] as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses capital.”¹ In other words, as Marx added, “in the slave system, money capital invested in the purchase of labor plays the role of the money form of *fixed* capital, which is only gradually replaced after the expiration of

¹ Karl Marx, “The Life-Destroying Toil of Slaves,” in *The Karl Marx Library*, Vol. II: *On America and the Civil War*, edited by Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 21. Hereafter referenced as Padover in footnotes, or, when there are repeated references to a particular text, directly in the text with page numbers.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

the active life period of the slave” (Padover, 21). Then, as a slave, the worker is not even recognized as a living laborer, but as dead labor. Furthermore, in this statement Marx contrasts the level of alienation of the worker as slave from wage laborer by identifying the slave as fixed capital, whereas wage labor has previously been referred to as working capital. Therefore, Marx never suggested that wage labor and chattel slavery are the same. He further distinguished the wage labor of the formally free working class from slave labor in another context when he wrote “We are not dealing here with indirect slavery, the slavery of the proletariat, we are dealing with direct slavery, the slavery of Blacks in Surinam, in Brazil, in the southern states of North America.”²

On one hand, Marx distinguished the two by comparing the increased freedom and mobility of the wage laborer to “the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence,” but on the other hand, he asserted that the two are connected by mocking the U.S. white Northern worker, who “boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master,”³ and who therefore deludes himself that he is free when his relative freedom is so small.

As for how racialized slavery came to be, Marx marked “the turning of Africa into a warren for *the commercial hunting of black skins*,” as the pivotal point that “signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”⁴ Marx acknowledged that slavery was “found among all nations since the world began,”⁵ but the slavery that paved the way for the emergence of Western capitalism had a unique and aberrant quality that contrasted it from slave systems in other societies of the past. In previous slave societies, people became slaves when they were taken as prisoners of war. It was a humane alternative to killing the vanquished.

Slavery and Capitalism

Under capitalism, the inhumane process of acquiring slaves came to resemble that of acquiring raw materials and livestock as free people were dehumanized and commoditized. The slave status became immutable and marked by birth. Like a commodity market, “the slave market itself maintains a constant supply of its labor-power

² Marx, “From letter written in French to Pavel Vassilyevich Annenkov,” in Padover, 36.

³ Marx, “Address of the International Working Men’s Association to President Lincoln,” in Padover, 237.

⁴ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1977), 915.

⁵ Marx, “From letter written in French to Pavel Vassilyevich Annenkov,” in Padover, 36.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

commodity by war, piracy, etc.,” similar to the way gold had been acquired over the centuries for its market, although slaves were distinct in that they were commodities that reproduced themselves.⁶ Although the modern Transatlantic Slave Trade was not the first instance of racialized slavery, Marx identified these distinct qualities of this slave system involving the branding of African skins as slaves as part of the foundation of Western capitalism.

“Before the slave trade in Negroes, the colonies supplied the Old World with but very few products and did not visibly change the fact of the world. Slavery is thus an economic category of the highest importance” (Padover, 24).

In other words, there was no commodity of greater importance connected to European colonies in the Americas as human labor as fixed capital. The export of slaves had a greater impact on the global economy than other raw materials combined.

“Direct slavery is the pivot of our industrialism today as much as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton, without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given value to the colonies; it is the colonies that created world trade; it is world trade that is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry” (Padover, 24).

The commercial buying and selling of African slaves transformed human laborers into fixed capital that produced the wealth enabling the Old World to develop the technologies for capitalist societies.

“Without slavery, North America, the most progressive country, would be transformed into a primitive country. You have only to erase North America from the map of nations and you will have anarchy, the total decay of commerce and of modern civilization. But to let slavery disappear is to erase North America from the map of nations” (Padover, 24).

Marx was not by any means arguing for the necessity of slavery for social progress here. In this context, Marx was not using “progressive” positively or “anarchy” negatively. He was simply attempting to depict the paramount importance of slavery for the American capitalist economy by portraying the way slavery’s absence would deflate the entirety of American society.

⁶ Marx, “Slavery as a General System,” in Padover, 24.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

The categories “slave” and “Negro” were analytically separate for Marx in a way they were not to most of his contemporaries. An African was forced into the position of human fixed capital. Marx proclaimed, “A Negro is a Negro. He becomes a slave only in certain relationships.”⁷ Marx is frequently misquoted out of context in the portion prior to it when he writes, “What is a Negro slave. A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other” (Padover, 13). But here he was only summing up Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in order to criticize him, not speaking in his own voice. Marx’s point, differentiating “Negro” and “slave,” is crucial to understanding that he did not succumb to the pseudoscientific racist ideology of his time.

Marx had also preemptively countered notions of Africans’ happiness in slavery and White slaveholders having innate abilities to govern effectively by noting that “50,000 slaves have vanished from Missouri, some of them having run away and others having been deported by the slaveholders themselves to the more southern states,”⁸ in this way showing that slaves loathed their conditions and slaveholders were petrified of slaves revolting.

Elsewhere, Marx was scathing towards defenders of slavery who assert the interchangeability of the categories of “slave” and “African.” In *Capital*, Vol. III, Marx quotes an ice-cold statement from a pro-slavery lawyer in 1859, which exposes the cruelty and conceit of the proslavery South:

“Now, gentlemen ... to that condition of bondage the Negro is assigned by Nature. He has strength and has the power to labor; but the Nature which created the power denied to him either the intellect to govern, or willingness to work. [Applause.] Both were denied to him. And that Nature which deprived him of the will to labor gave him a master to coerce that will, and to make a useful servant in the clime in which he was capable of living, useful for himself and for the master who governs him. I maintain that it is not injustice to leave the Negro in the condition in which Nature placed him, to give him a master to govern him; nor is it depriving him of any of his rights to compel him to labor in return, and afford to that master just compensation for the labor and talent employed in governing him and rendering him useful to himself and society.”⁹

⁷ Marx, “What is a Negro Slave?” in Padover, 13.

⁸ Marx, “A Crisis in the Slavery Question,” in Padover, 133.

⁹ Marx, “Master, Slave, and Overseer,” in Padover, 26.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

In this part of *Capital*, Vol. III, Marx was drawing a parallel between how masters seek to justify their rule over their slaves, and the capitalists' justifications for their domination over "free" wage labor. To this end, Marx added to the above in his own words:

"The wage laborer, *like* the slave, must have a master to make him work and to rule him. And presupposing the existence of this domination-and-bondage relationship, it is proper that the wage laborer be forced to produce his own wages and also the wages of supervision, as compensation for the labor of ruling and supervising him, 'and afford to that master just compensation for the labor and talent employed in governing him and rendering him useful to himself and to the society.'" (Padover, 26)

Here, without portraying slavery and wage labor as the same, Marx further connected the two labor systems.

This connection also implies the possibility of solidarity between these two groups of workers by introducing the master class's similar perceptions of both. In addition, Marx thereby embarrassed the factory managers by comparing them to slave drivers. Marx considered it outrageous that factory managers defend their economic positions and higher pay based upon what they consider to be their innate superiority in terms of talent based on class grounds. Marx compared this to the outrageousness of slave plantation masters defending their socio-political and economic positions in terms of innate talent based on racial grounds. One is rooted in racist ideology based on pseudoscientific racism, while the other is classist in nature, but nevertheless functionalist and dogmatic.

Marx made this distinction in *Capital*, Vol. III, which, like his Civil War writings, has not been as widely read, thus helping to explain the misconception of Marx as a class reductionist by people who make too much out of passages like the one in the very widely read *Communist Manifesto*, where he uses the word "slave" in referring to the working class as "slaves of the bourgeois class." As I have demonstrated, Marx was not so simplistic.

Marx to White Workers: Choose Race Solidarity over Class Solidarity at Your Peril!

Marx argued, "In the United States of North America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic."¹⁰ By raising the floor as a collective with cross-racial class solidarity, Marx believed that the

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 414.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

battle would be waged on a narrower front. Temporarily, Marx succeeded. As Kevin Anderson writes in *Marx at the Margins*, “In Marx’s view, the 1861-65 Civil War in the United States constituted one of the century’s major battles for human emancipation, one that forced white labor in both the United States and in Britain to take a stand against slavery.”¹¹

It is clear that Marx was aware of other arguments against slavery, as seen in his reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe in an 1861 article for the *New York Daily Tribune*. He knew that White Americans were conscious of the subjective rationale for the abolition of slavery and there was that widespread empathy due to her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹² Because Marx believed that White Americans had heard that logic already, I argue that Marx was introducing another attack on slavery for the more empirical and unsympathetic. It was not that Marx disagreed with Stowe or felt that the devastating emotional and physical traumas of slavery were insignificant. He was simply aware of that discussion already being in circulation; thus, another argument had to be launched on another level that might appeal as more urgent to those who perhaps had racist convictions that formed an obstacle to their support of abolition or who perhaps could not understand how slavery affected their own lives. Marx was determined to reveal this connection in order to urge solidarity across racial lines. If White labor could see how they themselves were threatened by slavery, and thus why they had a stake in its abolition, perhaps it would stir a greater sense of urgency for them to assume the position against slavery.

In addition to insisting upon the abolition of slavery as a means for the proletariat’s emancipation, Marx had warned that if Whites were to try to push Blacks down into a caste within the working class, it would only widen the spectrum to which they could be pushed down. If Marx’s warning went unheeded, writes Anderson, “the result would be a new form of capitalism, openly structured upon racial and ethnic lines, in which immigrant whites would join Blacks at the bottom” (Anderson 90). There was the need to resist the seduction of the illusion of becoming part of the capitalist class, as Anderson writes, quoting Marx:

“This was accomplished by giving the poor whites’ ‘turbulent impulses for action an innocuous direction and, to tame them with the prospect of themselves one day becoming slaveholders.’ Thus, the sectional conflict over slavery operated in an ideological manner

¹¹ Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 79.

¹² Marx, “The American Question in England,” in Padover, 53.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

to deflect the poor whites from conflict with the dominant classes of the south.” (Anderson 89)

Not only was Marx calling for the White working class to abandon petty bourgeois fantasies; he insisted that they had only two options – allow a victory for the South and thus the expansion of enslavement across racial lines, or align themselves for the emancipation of fellow oppressed human beings to overthrow the Southern ruling class.

“The present struggle between the South and the North is therefore nothing but a conflict between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labor. The struggle broke out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side-by-side on the North American continent. It can end only with the victory of one system or the other.”¹³

In this statement, Marx was calling for an end of the assigning of Blacks to the lowest labor caste as fixed capital. He stressed that in order to even fathom a class-wide revolution in the United States, Whites must fight for the emancipation of Blacks from slavery into equals, to form a larger, unified working class, rather than attempt to perpetuate racial castes within the working class.

Marx & the North During the Civil War in the U.S.

Marx’s support of the North was not unconditional by any means. His support was only to the degree that there were abolitionists, and that he observed the Civil War as an opportunity for the working class to rise up in solidarity with fellow oppressed human beings. In her *Marxism and Freedom*, Raya Dunayevskaya cites Marx, who wrote in a letter to Engels, “A single Negro regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves ... A war of this kind must be conducted on revolutionary lines while the Yankees have thus far been trying to conduct it constitutionally.”¹⁴ Marx urged early on that the Civil War be fought under the banner of abolition and to attack racialized slavery head-on. He sharply criticized non-Abolitionists in the North for skirting the matter.

“Anxiety about keeping the ‘loyal’ slaveholders in the border states in good humor, fear of throwing them into the arms of Secession – in a word, tender regard for the interests, prejudices, and sensibilities of these dubious allies – has smitten the Union government with incurable weakness since the beginning of the war, driven it to half-measures, forced

¹³ Marx, “The Civil War in the United States,” in Padover, 93.

¹⁴ Marx, cited in Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 82.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

it to dissemble away the principle of the war and *to spare the enemy's most vulnerable spot, the root of the evil – slavery itself.*"¹⁵

Calling out the war for what it was as “the Proslavery Rebellion,” Marx grew impatient with the sheepishness of the North in appeasing demands of the South and especially the Border States.

In August 1862, Marx published several critiques of Lincoln’s failures to abolish slavery. Asserting the voices of radical abolitionists in the North, Marx three years later advised Lincoln, in the 1865 Address of the First International congratulating him on his election victory: “If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is, Death to Slavery.”¹⁶ While Marx was supportive of radical abolitionists in the North, he was critical of the government’s conservatism. The Union government had initially referred to runaway slaves as contraband, and the military had been ordered to return the property that had stolen themselves from their owners. Marx’s acclaim for the North was inspired not by the Union government, but by honorable acts of social justice by Northern abolitionists, who refused to view African people as commodities or “contraband.”

As Marx’s Civil War writings and his other writings on race demonstrate, his political agenda and his theory were not, as commonly misunderstood, limited solely to a focus on the emancipation of the White working class from factory labor, or to an exclusive concentration the destruction of capitalism. The destruction of capitalism was secondary; it was a means for a large-scale human emancipation that could restore labor from its alienated form back into its human essence. Marx’s primary concern was human emancipation, and the extreme degree of alienation of racialized slave labor and its role as the pivot of Western capitalist civilization marked it as the necessary place to start.

Contrary to accusations that Marx was a class reductionist, his Civil War writings reveal that race did not take a back seat to the class struggle; rather, the struggle against slavery was the harbinger that propelled the working class to join the struggle for human emancipation by identifying the different forms that oppression took.

¹⁵ Marx, “The Civil War and the United States,” in Padover, 93.

¹⁶ Marx, “Address of the International Working Men’s Association to President Lincoln,” in Padover, 236.