

Abraham Lincoln, Karl Marx, and the U.S. Civil War

People: This is a three-part reading. The first two parts are contrasting *reviews* of a book on the intellectual connections between two major historical figures from the nineteenth century who, through their actions and words, helped to shape the world we live in today, who were alive at the same time (but lived on either side of the Atlantic Ocean), and who knew of each other; and the third is an article summarizing in greater detail the views of one of them on one of the most important events in the post-colonial history of this country: the U.S. Civil War (the reverberations of which continue to haunt us to this day, more than a century and a half later). You must read all parts, digest them, and be prepared to be tested on them.

Part One

Source: <http://hnn.us/node/139506>

Aaron Leonard, Review of Robin Blackburn's "An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln" (Verso Books, NY: 2011)

One was the founder of communism, the other a pillar of American democracy. That, along with many other things, made them as different as night and day. Yet they occupied the same historic period and profoundly affected their times. They both opposed slavery, though perhaps not on the same moral grounds one would wish for by today's standards. They also both supported the principle of free labor—a concept that was essential to the emergent industrial economy that would soon transform the world. The men were Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx. They are not often thought of together, but as Robin Blackburn's new book makes clear there are important ways in which they should be.

Slavery in the New World was but one leg of an elaborate production and trade system. It went from the slave trading "business" in Africa, to the plantations of the New World, to the cotton mills of Manchester and Birmingham. Slavery was foundational to this set up yet at the same time a barrier to its further expansion. For once capitalism took hold it was labor power, untethered to land or master, that was needed to fuel the ascendant economy. It was this force that emboldened and impelled the best of the generation living amid and under it, to take up the cause, even taking up arms, to throw it off. It is this underlying political economy that is too often lost when discussing the American Civil War. In this book of documents, with a generous introduction, Blackburn thus fills in a certain blind-spot in the historical record.

Lincoln and Marx never directly spoke—though they did exchange correspondence through intermediaries—yet what each did profoundly affected the other, and in turn reacted back on their contentious and crisis-ridden world. Marx, of course was the radical who saw things in stark terms. Writing in his article, "The North American Civil War," he cast the conflict as, "Whether 20 million freemen in the North should be subordinating themselves any longer to an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders." In such writing one gets a keen sense of the sheer scope of the discrepancy of the two systems. This, as Blackburn explains, was why, "Marx's argument and belief was that the real confrontation was between two social regimes, one based on slavery and the other on free labor." He quotes Marx, "The struggle has broken out because the two systems can no longer live peaceably side by side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other."

Lincoln was more temperate. He tried mightily to avert war, to compromise, to hold the Union together. As Blackburn writes, "Unlike the Radicals, he did not fulminate against the 'slave power.'" Yet he "did attack exorbitant representation of Southern white men in the House of Representatives and electoral College." However, as events unfolded he would lead the U.S. in waging a Civil War to defend that Union. He would eventually sign the Emancipation Proclamation that would allow former slaves to fight in the Union Army, an unimaginable position only a few years earlier, to say nothing of laying the basis for the abolition of all slavery and legal enfranchisement of freedmen (though not fully realized till a century later).

Blackburn's introduction succinctly concentrates the political events leading up to and through the war and its aftermath. Along the way he raises a number of issues, including the dearth of support for women's rights, the role of German immigrants in radicalizing the political terms of the era, and the notion of Southern nationalism. This later point was something Marx dismissed out of hand, writing that, "[The South] is not a country at all, but a battle slogan." Blackburn disagrees—In a follow up for this review he elaborated, "Marx was generally

hostile to what he saw as the one-sidedness of even democratic nationalism and it is odd to read him writing of the 'moral unity' [talking of the U.S.] of what was still a capitalist (and slaveholding) society. He may have been more influenced by nationalism than he thought." As he writes in the book, "Both nationalisms [North and South] had a markedly expansive character, but the Union's was purely continental at this stage whereas the Confederacy's looked toward South America (notably to Cuba) as well as to the west. The clash was thus one of rival empires as well as competing nationalisms."

Such provocative questions are not a matter of "what-if," but go to the actual nature of historic development. In that sense this book—with Marx's newspaper articles, Lincoln's key speeches, statements of the International Workingmen Association, letters between Marx, Fredrick Engels, Joseph Wedeymeyer and others—is a valuable contribution in untangling the past that has so forcefully stamped the present.

[The author of the book reviewed here,] Robin Blackburn, teaches at the New School in New York and the University of Essex in the UK. He is the author of many books, including *The Making of New World Slavery*, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, *Age Shock*, *Banking on Death*. Simultaneous with the release of *Unfinished Revolution* he released, *The American Crucible: Emancipation and Human Rights*, which examines slavery in the Americas from 1492 to 1888, when Brazilian emancipation ended slavery in the New World.

Part Two

SOURCE: <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/book-reviews/15689-an-unfinished-revolution-karl-marx-and-abraham-lincoln>

Book Review

An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln

Thursday, 05 April 2012

By Katherine Connelly

Robin Blackburn offers an exciting new perspective on Marx's interpretation of the American Civil War that puts the question of slavery back at its heart, argues Katherine Connelly.

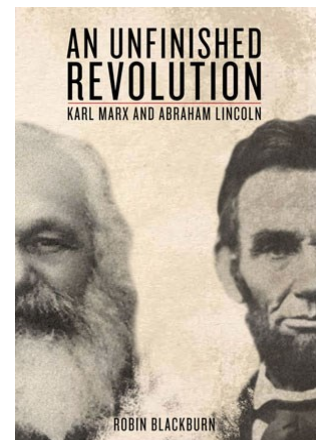
Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (Verso Books, NY: 2011), 272pp.

When Karl Marx was asked in a family game to name his hero, he did not pick one of the 'giants' of philosophy, politics or economics whose works he drew so much inspiration from; he did not mention Hegel, or Robespierre, or Goethe, or Adam Smith. Instead he answered 'Spartacus', the slave who led a war of slaves against the might of the Roman Empire. For Marx, Spartacus was 'the finest fellow produced by the whole of classical history... a real representative of the ancient proletariat'.[1]

When, in the ferment of the 1848 revolutions, a working-class revolt began in Paris, Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels, rejected comparisons with the famous Parisian revolutions of 1789 and 1830. Instead he compared it to 'the Roman slave war'.[2]

Slave revolts captured the imagination of Marx and Engels. In contrast to the recent 'bourgeois' revolutions from which new oppressions had followed old, slave revolts represented something uncompromising, a revolt that could not be co-opted or assimilated into the old system. It had to win decisively or perish. Slave revolts therefore provided a pertinent parallel to working-class revolution.

An Unfinished Revolution, Robin Blackburn's republication of and introduction to Marx's articles on America, demonstrate that the question of slavery was central to his analysis of the American Civil War. Marx's vibrant, searing analysis of the war was as iconoclastic in its own time as it remains today.



During the war, leading London newspapers argued that this was not a war for the abolition of slavery, it was in fact a 'tariff war', a clash of economics, and so the Union government had no moral superiority and was not to be supported. Marx however resisted reducing the questions of the war to one of economics. He cut through the hypocrisy of the British commentators, who claimed that they would not support the North because it was not *genuinely* pro-abolition, by showing that they also utterly condemned the idea of a slave revolt, which would be the *most genuine* abolitionist movement (Blackburn, p.146).

Blackburn's introduction shows that Marx's position also differed from many other European liberals and radicals who, initially at least, supported the secession of the South from the Union 'partly because many of them distrusted strong states and championed the right of small nations to self-determination' (p.5). Blackburn shows that Marx's support for the North from the outset was due to an analysis of the roots of the conflict, which saw through the rhetoric of the rights or wrongs of self-determination: 'he refused to define the struggle in the terms first adopted by the belligerents themselves' (p.8).

The issue of 'self-determination' had arisen because of the problems posed by a system based on slave labour. The economy based on slavery was unable to sustain itself as it existed in the Union. The slaveholders were anxious to expand the number of slave states because the soil was becoming exhausted, and therefore producing less profit, and they needed new markets in which to sell slaves. Marx saw that the rhetoric of fighting for Southern liberty was in reality 'fighting for the liberty of enslaving other people' (p.140).

Blackburn's reading of Marx also provides a challenge to an established view, expressed in some of the 'standard' collections of Marx's work, that Marx was naïve in his ardent support for the North in the Civil War. It is argued that he failed to see the interests of rampant capitalism behind the anti-slavery rhetoric of the North, while also failing to acknowledge the popular nature of resistance in the South.[3]

In fact, Marx's exposure of the slaveholders' expansionist desires also explained their wider support in the South:

'Only with the acquisition of new territories, the prospect of such acquisition, and filibustering expeditions is it possible to harmonize the interests of these "poor whites" successfully with those of the slaveholders, to channel their restless thirst for action in a harmless direction, and to tempt them with the prospect of becoming slaveholders themselves one day' (p.136).

Expansionist rhetoric was therefore also a cynical tool to encourage the Southern poor to identify their interests with those of the Southern ruling class. As expansionism rested upon the slave system, the slave population would have to be liberated for the poor white population to be liberated.

Marx applied this dialectical approach to the question of tensions in the North. Far from wholeheartedly supporting a homogenous 'North', Marx's letters on America convey his mistrust in the bourgeois Northern rulers: 'Of course, like other people, I see the repulsive side of the form the movement takes among the Yankees, but I find the explanation of it in the nature of "bourgeois" democracy' (p.199).

The Northern rulers' interest in maintaining the 'order' of the hierarchical status quo was hampering their interest in successfully prosecuting the War, as they refused to adopt the tactics of revolutionary warfare, for example by liberating and arming all the slaves. This contradiction between the interests at the top of Northern society, and its needs in the war would, Marx hoped, create revolutionary conditions in the North. In 1862 he wrote 'it is possible that it will come to a sort of revolution in the North itself first' (p.197).

Therefore, for Marx, it was not a question of turning a blind eye to the problems of the North in order to oppose slavery, but rather he saw the fight against slavery as an essential element in creating conditions for the fight for general working-class emancipation. This dialectical formulation appears in the International Workingmen's Association's Address to Abraham Lincoln, in which Marx wrote:

'The workingmen of Europe feel sure that as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American antislavery war will do for the working classes' (p.212).

The cause of the slaves, the working class and the poor – North and South – were, for Marx, the same cause.

While the working class revolution that Marx had hoped for did not materialise, there was a huge wave of working class revolt in the aftermath of the War. This period saw the growth of labour organisations and the campaign for the eight hour day. The new militancy even inspired freed slaves working on the land, as 'their new employers complained that the freed people thought that they could withdraw their labour whenever convenient or demand higher pay just when the harvest had to be brought in' (p.66).

Blackburn charts the involvement of the International Workingmen's Association ('The International' of which Marx was one of the leaders) in the post-war industrial struggles. He also challenges the common assumption that Marx's decision to move the International's Headquarters to the United States in the 1870s was purely motivated by an attempt to make the involvement of European anarchists impossible. Blackburn suggests that Marx saw that International's relative success in America meant it could 'sink real roots' there: by the early 1870s the International had 50 sections in 12 urban areas, and in 1871 it was strong enough to call a demonstration of 70,000 upwards in New York in protest at the massacre of the Communards in Paris (pp.72-7).

This fascinating relationship between Marx and America is the heart of the book and perhaps should have been the subject of the book. However, the book purports to examine the ideas of Karl Marx *and* Abraham Lincoln, and explore a dialogue between them. This does not work for a number of reasons. Firstly, the dialogue never happened. In the section titled 'Letters between Marx and Lincoln' there are three documents, the first is the International's address to Lincoln, the second is the reply by the American Ambassador to Britain (not Lincoln), and the third is the International's Address to President Andrew Johnson. They were clearly not ardent pen-pals.

Secondly, I would argue that there is some wishful thinking in Blackburn's introduction which is not borne out by the documents provided as evidence. Lincoln in the 1850s had argued against rights for black people, and suggested that freed slaves should leave America and go to Africa. His Emancipation Proclamation, which came into force during the War in 1863, only emancipated slaves in states which declared themselves outside the Union. While Blackburn shows that Lincoln's ideas changed on the questions of black Americans, he then goes on to suggest that his later contact with the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass seems 'to signal the stirring of an awareness of the need for African American agency if freedom were really to be won' (p.53). Douglass' own comment on Lincoln, cited as evidence of this, to me suggests the opposite conclusion, that Lincoln remained opportunistic on the question of race:

'Viewed from genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent, but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined' (pp.52-3).

The basis for the comparison with Marx appears to be what Lincoln's views might have *become* rather than what they really were. Likewise, while it is true that Marx described Lincoln as 'the single-minded son of the working class', he did so in the context of the International's formal 1865 Address to Lincoln, encouraging the most radical vision of post-war America (p.212).

However, Marx's private letters and articles cited in the book show he was much more sceptical about Lincoln's motives. The agent of change was not really this son of the working class, but the radicalism happening in wider American society; he wrote of the coming American election late in 1864:

'If Lincoln gets through this time – as is very probable – it will be on a much more radical platform and under wholly changed circumstances. In conformity with his legal manner, the old man will then find more radical methods compatible with his conscience' (p.206).

In one article, he quoted at length the abolitionist Wendell Phillips' attack on Lincoln's half-measures in the War, stating that Phillips' analysis was 'of greater importance than a battle bulletin' (p.178). Marx's articles convey his deep criticism of Lincoln's strategy. In fact, the Marx family were so openly critical of Lincoln that even Marx's daughter Eleanor, who was not 10 years old, composed long letters to Lincoln offering her advice on how to win the war.[4]

If the meeting of two minds cannot be proved, the two minds hardly provide much of a match for each other. Marx's detailed observations on the political, economic and military aspects of the war far outweigh, both intellectually and in the amount of space awarded, the three formal Addresses by Lincoln and the text of the compromised Emancipation Proclamation.

It is perhaps in seeking to redress this imbalance that Blackburn has included texts from other American authors. Undoubtedly these texts are interesting in their own right and it is a pleasure to see texts which have been unjustly overlooked being brought to light. Victoria Woodhull, writing on women and children's rights, and Lucy Parsons, speaking at the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World, were both figures who had some involvement in the International. Lucy Parsons' husband had been sentenced to death after the Haymarket Massacre in 1886, when a bomb exploded at a workers' protest and police fired on the crowd. However, their inclusion does seem artificial, especially as Lucy Parsons' politics were, by the time of her speech in 1905, quite different from those Marx had insisted on in the International. Indeed, a far more natural inclusion would have been Eleanor Marx's speech in the immediate aftermath of the Haymarket Massacre which she made in America. However, the seemingly arbitrary inclusion of these texts adds to the impression that Blackburn is trying to force parallels that do not really hold up to scrutiny.

Nevertheless, Blackburn provides, through close reading of Marx and detailed contextual knowledge, citing the most up-to-date scholarship, a fresh perspective on Marx's relationship to events in America. The pieces by Marx are a delight to read, demonstrating not only a brilliant critical analysis, but also the positive engagement of a passionate revolutionary who, though seeing compromise and rhetoric all around, argued against standing aside. Moreover, they point to the message in the title of the book... the revolution is still unfinished.

Notes

[1] D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.302.

[2] *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 7 (Lawrence and Wishart), p.130.

[3] See, for example, D. Fernbach's Introduction to *Karl Marx: Surveys from Exile Political Writings*, Vol. 2 (Penguin Books, 1973), p.32.

Part Three

SOURCE: <http://isreview.org/issue/80/karl-marx-and-american-civil-war>

Karl Marx and the American Civil War

By [Donny Schraffenberger](#)
[Issue #80](#)

THE CIVIL War is the defining event in the history of the United States, yet also the most misunderstood. More books are written on this war than on any period of US history, yet for all the words poured across the pages, the real cause of the war—slavery—is usually missed or obscured. Rather, there are tales of chivalrous Confederate generals heroically leading charges, drunken Union generals butchering their men in horrible frontal assaults, brothers fighting brothers in a pointless war that ravaged the land and wounded a people. Was the Civil War just a tragic mistake? A war like any other imperialist war the United States ruling class has its soldiers fighting in today? While some answer these questions with a yes, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels would have been taken aback. They would have resoundingly answered “no.” The Civil War, they believed, was not just another horrible atrocity, but rather a revolution that ended slavery and destroyed the slave-owners’ power as a class.

Marx and Engels saw the events leading to the Civil War as momentous. In a January 1861 letter to Engels, written after the election of Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln, but before his inauguration, Marx wrote, “In my opinion, the biggest things that are happening in the world today are on the one hand the movement of the slaves in America started by the death of John Brown, and on the other the movement of the serfs in Russia.”¹

During the war, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels contributed dozens of insightful articles for the *New York Tribune* and, later, for the Viennese *Die Presse* on political and military issues. Engels specialized on the military strategy of the Lincoln administration and that of the Confederate Jefferson Davis rebel government. Karl Marx had a more sweeping look at the conflict, from the economic development of the nation to the actions of the political and military leaders. Overall, Marx had a better grasp on the whole war. Both men saw the war as an extension of the American Revolution of 1776. Marx and Engels argued that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the North’s arming of Black soldiers transformed the Civil War from a purely constitutional war to preserve the country with slavery intact, into a revolutionary war. They did not characterize the Civil War as a socialist revolutionary war, but they believed that it advanced the cause of all workers, both white and Black, by destroying chattel slavery. The revolution armed former slaves, destroyed the horrendous institution of slavery without compensation to the slave-owners, and opened the way for a struggle between the working class and the capitalist class. As a result, our next revolution in this country will be a working-class revolution.

During the American Civil War, Marx and Engels resided in England, having fled their German homeland following the failed 1848 democratic revolutions in Europe. Marx wrote for two newspapers, the *New York Daily Tribune* and the Viennese *Die Presse*, with Engels also contributing under Marx’s name. Marx began writing for the *Tribune* in 1852, publishing 350 articles, with Engels supplying another 125, and their jointly writing twelve, until the paper terminated Marx’s employment in 1862. As the European correspondent for the paper, Marx wrote on diverse topics from Tory election corruption to the increase of mental illness in Great Britain. Meanwhile, he was conducting his research for *Capital*. Due to the increased Civil War coverage, the *Tribune* pruned its European contributors to Karl Marx alone, until firing him in March 1862.

Marx was understandably upset to receive his walking papers as he relied on the income from the *Tribune* to pay his bills. In 1861, he started writing for *Die Presse*. He signed a total of 52 articles, one written by Engels and two jointly written. In late 1862, he stopped writing for the paper, upset at the fact that many of his articles never made it to print. The paper paid him only for articles published.² Marx’s rocky relations with the mainstream newspapers were our loss. His *Tribune* and *Die Presse* articles on the Civil War make for a fascinating read; the clarity of his insight holds up extremely well 150 years later.

Karl Marx viewed the war, not as Southern apologists saw it (“a war of Northern aggression”), but rather one of Southern aggression through which the planter class hoped to preserve its political dominance. Until the election of Lincoln in 1860, the vast majority of United States presidents were either slave-owners or pro-slavery. And the slave-owners dominated the Congress and Supreme Court as well. By the mid-nineteenth century, immigration from Europe had swelled the Northern population, potentially delivering the North far more representatives in Congress. This threatened the South’s overrepresentation in Congress, based as it was on the US Constitution’s clause

defining African Americans held in slavery as each three-fifths of a human being. This “compromise” allowed the slaveholding states more representation than should have been allowed in the House of Representatives, even though African Americans had no rights as citizens.

Many of the American revolutionaries of the eighteenth century wanted to contain slavery to the original thirteen states, and eventually to legislate it out of existence. The original Northern states allowed slavery, but over time the institution was outlawed. Slavery was forbidden in the Northwest Territory, the area today known as the Midwest. Most of the Constitution’s framers hoped that the institution of slavery would wither away in the South. But the Industrial Revolution in England, and the ever-expanding British textile industry, drove up demand for cotton. The Southern planters received a new lease on life. They began growing cotton for the emerging European textile market, which required more land, and more slaves to work the land. With their slave system thriving, the slave-owners wanted to ensure that this profitable enterprise would expand and prosper. The more farsighted plantation owners could foresee that an ever-expanding majority of Northern voters, irritated by slavery’s competition with “free labor,” would eventually outvote the pro-slavery South in a presidential election. To compensate for this loss of political power, the slave-owners had expanded into the new western territories, trying to establish them as slave states. These new slave states would guarantee the planters two senators each, which positioned the Senate to block any attack on their “peculiar institution.” Nevertheless, Northerners would have more votes in the House of Representatives, and pro-slavery forces recognized this dilemma. Consequently, the South’s power was focused on the less-democratic US Senate, where each state, no matter how small its population, received the same representation. This battle between free state Northerners and pro-slavery Southerners would erupt into civil war in 1850s Kansas as people from both regions rushed into the territory.

Karl Marx recognized that the core reason for the war was chattel slavery, an economic system in which people are kept in bondage and not compensated for their labor. As today, apologists for the secession of the Southern states argued that other issues, such as state’s rights or tariffs, rather than slavery, explained the insurrection. Marx shattered these arguments in his October 20, 1861, *Die Presse* article, “The North American Civil War.” He took Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, at his word when Stephens proclaimed what Southern secession was really all about. Wrote Marx:

The question of the principle of the American Civil War is answered by the battle slogan with which the South broke the peace. Stephens...declared in the secession Congress, that what essentially distinguished the Constitution hatched at Montgomery from the Constitution of the Washingtons and Jeffersons was that for now for the first time slavery was recognized as institution for good in itself, and as the foundation of the whole state edifice, whereas the revolutionary fathers, men steeped in the prejudices of the eighteenth century, had treated slavery as an evil imported from England and to be eliminated in the course of time.³

Marx continued:

The cultivation of the Southern export articles, cotton, tobacco, sugar, etc., carried on by slaves, is only remunerative as long as it is conducted with large gangs of slaves, on a mass scale and on wide expanses of a naturally fertile soil, which requires only simple labor. Intensive cultivation, which depends less on fertility of the soil than on investment of capital, intelligence and energy of labor, is contrary to the nature of slavery.⁴

Marx demonstrated that the soil of the Old South was exhausted. In those areas slaves' family members were sold to the more fertile regions of the Deep South and Southwest. Owners of exhausted land, which was no longer adequate for growing crops, became sellers of African-American slaves to new areas that were under cultivation. The dynamics of the plantation system, using large-scale slave labor and exhausting the soil, required expansion of the system if it was to remain sustainable. The acquisition of new territories, through war with Mexico in the 1840s and the conquest of the remaining Native American land corresponded exactly with pro-slavery interests. Southerners, not content with westward expansion, even attempted to take over sections of Central America. Some even had eyes on South America. The slave system was competing with the expansion of the free labor system for control of the territories. Northern farmers, producing for a market with their own labor, wanted to recreate the economic conditions in the free states they recently left. The two systems could not live side by side forever.

If slavery were contained in the existing slave states, it would go into economic decline. Slave-owners would fall behind in political power to the emerging Northern capitalists, and this would cause a rift between the slaveholders and the poor whites who would no longer have the chance of becoming masters themselves. Containing slavery would jeopardize the compatible relationship of the ruling slaveholder class and the poor whites. In a brilliant passage describing this process, Marx wrote:

[T]he number of actual slaveholders in the South of the Union does not amount to more than 300,000, 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 [i.e. conquests of other lands, such as in Central America—ISR], 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.

A strict confinement of slavery within its old terrain, therefore, was bound according to economic law to lead to its gradual extinction, in the political sphere to annihilate the hegemony that the slave states exercised through the Senate, and finally to expose the slaveholding oligarchy within its own states to threatening perils from the “poor whites.” In accordance with the principle that any further extension of slave Territories was to be prohibited by law, the Republicans therefore attacked the rule of the slaveholders at its root. The Republican election victory was accordingly bound to lead to open struggle between North and South. And this election victory, as already mentioned, was itself conditioned by the split in the Democratic camp.⁵

Not all whites in the slave states of the Confederacy wanted to secede. Many wanted to stay in the Union. However, the vast majority of poor whites weren't abolitionists. They didn't thrive economically because Blacks were enslaved. Slavery actually hindered their economic development. Even though slavery was against their own class interests, poor whites continued to support the slave system on the hope that some day, as Marx noted, they would become slaveholders themselves. They recognized that despite their poverty and lack of education, they, at least, were not slaves. Marx differentiated between the border states and the rest of the South. He argued that in the border states, free labor and slavery were still battling for ultimate control. Whites in these slave states realized that they had an interest in abolishing slavery.

Britain and the Civil War

Another class of white men, the textile capitalists of Britain, wanted their government to intervene on the side of the Confederacy. Confederate leaders, hoping to pressure the big European powers to recognize their rebellion, stopped shipment of cotton overseas when the war broke out. Later on, a Union blockade of the South would also hinder cotton moving across the Atlantic. In the geopolitics of the day, Britain and France were the dominant powers in the mid-nineteenth century. Both governments wanted to weaken the United States, even to see it broken in two. Taking advantage of the war in the United States, France invaded and occupied Mexico in 1862 in an attempt to expand its influence in the Americas.

Southern military and political strategy was tied to winning recognition from the European powers, especially from Britain and France. British arms manufacturers profited from the war by selling arms not only to Lincoln's government, but also to the Confederates. British shipbuilding companies supplied the Confederate navy with military vessels that lacked only cannon, which could be purchased later.

The Lincoln administration not only had to deal with a hostile South, but it also had to contend with a possible intervention by the European powers of France and Britain. These two powers broke bones and left corpses in their wake with their pillage of Africa, Asia, and everywhere lands and seas could be exploited for the benefit of their ruling classes. The Northern states were an upcoming potential rival to these two powers. Thus, a weakened United States would fit nicely into the carving up of the world. The Jefferson Davis administration, recognizing the common cause of their rebellion with the leaders of France and Britain, attempted to send representatives to those countries to win recognition of the Confederate States of America as the sole legitimate government of the South.

In the fall of 1861, the Union warship San Jacinto searched an English mail ship, the HMS Trent. Confederate representatives Mason and Slidell were on board the British vessel. The San Jacinto's Captain Wilkes arrested the two Confederate agents. When word reached the shores of Britain, capitalist reactionaries were livid. That a US ship would challenge the supremacy of the British on the high seas was a cause for war.

In a November 28, 1861, article entitled “The Trent Case,” Marx writes of the wild mood sweeping Britain.

The wildest rumors circulated in London. The American Ambassador Adams was said to be given his passports, an embargo to have been imposed on all American ships in the Thames, etc. At the same time a protest of the merchants was held at the Stock Exchange in Liverpool, to demand measures from the British Government for the satisfaction of the violated honor of the British flag. Every sound-minded Englishman went to bed with the conviction that he would go to sleep in a state of peace but wake in a state of war.⁶

Sections of the British ruling class saw the Civil War as an opportunity. Marx quotes the *Economist's* pro-war position. “A war with America,” says the *Economist*, a paper deeply in Palmerston's confidence, “must always be one of the most lamentable incidents in the history of England; but if it is to happen, the present is certainly the period at which it will do us the minimum of harm, and the only moment in our joint annals at which it would confer on us an incidental and partial compensation.”⁷

At the same moment that the haughty gentlemen of the ruling class were shouting for war between sips of gin, British workers were standing firm against war with the United States. Karl Marx wrote in the February 1, 1862, *Tribune* that, “It ought never to be forgotten in the United States that at least the working classes of England, from the commencement to the determination of the difficulty, have never forsaken them. 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.”⁸

The British government sailed soldiers to Canada, providing a force that wasn't strong enough to pose a threat to the United States, but enough to give cheer to the Confederacy. Prime Minister Palmerston's government would not yet call for all out war. The Lincoln administration eventually defused the situation, ordering the release of the captured Confederate representatives Mason and Slidell.

Yet throughout 1862, the Confederate government attempted to entice Britain to recognize its legitimacy. By the end of the summer of 1862, after a string of Confederate victories in the Eastern Theater, Confederate General Robert E. Lee gambled that one more decisive victory, especially on Northern soil, would tip Britain and France completely over to the Confederate side. Meanwhile, in the Western Theater, the Confederate armies of Generals Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith moved into Kentucky from Tennessee and threatened Louisville and Cincinnati. The stakes were high in the fall of 1862. Would sections of the British ruling class prevail and win their government's recognition of the Confederacy—and perhaps support a military intervention against the United States—or would the British workers' movement, in solidarity with the Northern cause stop the reactionaries from having their way?

Confederate defeats at the Battles of Antietam in Maryland and of Perryville in Kentucky stopped the slave-owners' joint offensives. Still, the 1862 congressional elections went badly for the pro-war Republican Party. Conservative Democrats who supported peace with the South made gains. Yet as Marx later pointed out, Lincoln didn't concede to reaction, but instead went on the political offensive. He sacked the conservative Democratic General George McClellan for McClellan's refusal to pursue the defeated Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. He also issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the greatest document in US history since the Declaration of Independence, according to Karl Marx's October 12, 1862, *Die Presse* article:

Lincoln's proclamation is even more important than the Maryland campaign. Lincoln is a sui generis figure in the annals of history. He has no initiative, no idealistic impetus, no cothurnus, no historical trappings. He gives his most important actions always the most commonplace form....His latest proclamation, which is drafted in the same style, the manifesto abolishing slavery, is the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union, tantamount to the tearing up of the old American Constitution.

Nothing is simpler than to show that Lincoln's principal political actions contain much that is aesthetically repulsive, logically inadequate, farcical in form and politically, contradictory, as is done by, the English Pindars of slavery, the *Times*, the *Saturday Review* and *tutti quanti*. But Lincoln's place in the history of the United States and of mankind will, nevertheless, be next to that of Washington! Nowadays, when the insignificant struts about melodramatically on this side of the Atlantic, is it of no significance at all that the significant is clothed in everyday dress in the new world?

Lincoln is not the product of a popular revolution. This plebeian, who worked his way up from stone-breaker to Senator in Illinois, without intellectual brilliance, without a particularly outstanding character, without exceptional importance—an average person of good will, was placed at the top by the interplay of the forces of universal suffrage unaware of the great issues at stake. The new world has never achieved a greater triumph than by this demonstration that, given its political and social organization, ordinary people of good will can accomplish feats which only heroes could accomplish in the old world!⁹

As the war and revolution were drastically changing class relations in the United States, the war also had a major impact in the class war between the capitalists and the working class in Britain. Shortages of cotton from the South eventually caused a major crisis in British industry. Thousands of workers were thrown out of employment, or put on reduced hours. Yet while the textile bosses angled for armed intervention on the side of the slave-owners, the British working class stood in solidarity with the Union struggle. Marx and Engels were part of a movement against British intervention in the American Civil War. Marx, for example, spoke at a meeting of 3,000 trade unionists against intervention. The movement helped stop the British government from recognizing and fighting for the Confederacy.

Years later, John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary, would confirm this. He wrote of the tumultuous beginning of the Civil War in his 1881 book, *The Outbreak of Rebellion*. Nicolay detailed the different response of the British working class to the war compared to the capitalist class. "And when the hour of distress and trial finally came to the industrial classes of England, the noble devotion of the Manchester cotton operatives to universal liberty put to shame and impotence the greedy cupidity of the cotton merchants of Liverpool."¹⁰ Similarly, Marx, in a leaflet supporting Polish independence, contrasted the German bourgeois liberals' betrayal of Poland with the English workers' support of the Northern war effort. Marx proclaimed: "The English working class has won immortal historical honor for itself by thwarting the repeated attempts of the ruling classes to intervene on behalf of the American slaveholders by its enthusiastic mass meetings, even though the prolongation of the American Civil War subjects a million English workers to the most fearful suffering and privations."¹¹

Marx and Engels backed the Republican Party and its candidate Lincoln. Although it's hard to fathom today, in 1860 the Republican Party had socialists, abolitionists, and other radicals in its membership. It was a new party that had emerged from the conflict in the Kansas territory prior to the Civil War. The Republican Party was perceived as a threat to the slave-owners and their allies. Abolitionists and other radicals debated joining the Republican Party. Could its leadership be trusted? Were the more prominent members of the party really serious in ending slavery? Many came to the conclusion that the party was at least moving, or could be moved, towards that end. European

revolutionaries, political refugees from the failed 1848 revolutions, joined the Republican Party. These revolutionaries also took up arms and fought for the Union.

Revolutionaries such as former Prussian officer August Willich, Engels commander in 1849, exemplified this. Willich was also a leader of the Communist League with Karl Marx, until a falling out with Marx over Willich's idea of sending an armed force back into the German lands to restart the revolution. Marx argued that this wild plan would fail. Willich later gave up his scheme and moved to the United States. He eventually resided in the large German émigré community of Cincinnati, where he edited a radical newspaper. He would train the all-German Ninth Ohio Infantry regiment, whose volunteer soldiers had belonged to the radical Turnverein in Germany. Before the war, many members of the Ninth Ohio fought against the anti-immigrant chauvinism of the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s. They came to the conclusion that fighting for the Union was participating in a revolutionary war. Gustav Kammerling, a colonel in the Ninth, had been elected in 1848 as leader of a revolutionary militia. He also later fought alongside Engels and Willich in the Palatinate. The Ninth Ohio's regimental history, *Die Neuner*, contains many interesting anecdotes illustrating how the soldiers viewed the Civil War as a continuation of the 1848 Revolution. The Ninth and other German regiments would sing revolutionary songs into battle, demanded that they be allowed to speak in their native German, and also successfully fought against General Sherman's ban on alcohol. They got to keep their kegs of beer.

From restoration of the union to the abolition of slavery

The Lincoln administration did not set the destruction of slavery as a war aim at the outset of the Civil War. The majority of white Americans were not convinced of abolition in 1860. But the second American Revolution, the Civil War, would transform many indifferent or even pro-slavery whites into supporters of abolition. People's involvement in debates, joining and fighting in the Union army, and witnessing slaves and former slaves fight back, convinced many to become slavery's destroyers. But this process took the experience of the first years of the Civil War, when the policy of the Lincoln administration and some of its leading generals, like McClellan, was to restore the country as it was before secession, with slavery intact. Marx, writing about the 1860 election that brought Lincoln to the White House, stated that, "if Lincoln would have had Emancipation of the Slaves as his motto at that time, there can be no doubt that he would have been defeated."¹²

Marx's insight was different from that of many contemporary historians who seem awestruck by Lincoln's "perfect" political timing. To them, it is as if Lincoln could foresee the future and always knew when to apply the correct amount of steam or brakes on the fast running locomotive of the Civil War history. Of course, in 1860, Lincoln would never have been nominated if he were a radical abolitionist. He was chosen because he was a moderate in the Republican Party, acceptable to both the right and the left. If Lincoln and his cabinet weren't ready to destroy slavery in the first year of his administration, others were.

The resistance of slaves and former slaves mattered. Their running away, denying their labor to the Confederacy, helping the Union armies, and agitating to take up a rifled musket to bring down the slaveocracy convinced more and more Northerners of their cause for freedom. Abolitionists, both Black and white, organized meetings and demonstrations. Antislavery papers such as Frederick Douglass's *North Star* or William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* helped to sway public opinion. Soldiers debating the nature of war and slavery around the campfire also had its impact. The timidity of the conservative generals, and their unwillingness to bring the full resources of the Union army down upon the Confederacy, fueled the national debate. The old strategy of compromising to win over slavery supporters was no longer working. Which way forward?

The war was a product of a revolutionary process, and Lincoln had options. He could have made peace with the South, keeping slavery intact. He could have kept the war a constitutional one, but how long could the revolution be checked? Alongside people fighting for slavery's destruction were those in the North who sided with the South. Southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had their share of Copperheads—Northerners with Confederate sympathies. In Southern Illinois, a region called Little Egypt, some reactionaries wanted to secede from Illinois and join the Confederacy. The reactionary elements wanted to preserve the old status quo. Soon, pressure built up on both sides of the slavery question. The old system could not hold. As Lincoln later said, he wasn't at the forefront of the revolutionary process—he was more a prisoner of events. Yet, he eventually moved in the revolutionary direction. He did not move as far as the most farsighted fighters for freedom, like the Black abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass rightfully wanted. But he moved far more than any president before or since.

As Marx noted in 1862,

At the present moment, when secession's stocks are rising, the spokesmen of the border states are making even greater claims. However, Lincoln's appeal to them, in which he threatens them with inundation by the Abolition party, shows that things are taking a revolutionary turn. Lincoln knows what Europe does not know, that it is by no means apathy or giving way under pressure of defeat that causes his demand for 300,000 recruits to meet with such a cold response. New England and the Northwest, which have provided the main body of the army, are determined to force on the government a revolutionary kind of warfare and to inscribe the battle-slogan of "Abolition of Slavery!" on the star-spangled banner. Lincoln yields only hesitantly and uneasily to this pressure from without, but he knows he cannot resist it for long. Hence his urgent appeal to the border states to renounce the institution of slavery voluntarily and under advantageous contractual conditions. He knows that only the

continuance of slavery in the border states has so far left slavery untouched in the South and prohibited the North from applying its great radical remedy. He errs only if he imagines that the “loyal” slaveholders are to be moved by benevolent speeches and rational arguments. They will yield only to force.

So far, we have only witnessed the first act of the Civil War—the constitutional waging of war. The second act, the revolutionary waging of war, is at hand.”¹³

Marx summarized the most important legislation that Congress enacted in its first session during the war. Slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia, with monetary compensation for the former slaveholders. Slavery was “forever impossible” in US territories. Slavery would be abolished by stages in the new state of West Virginia. Slaves were freed as soon as they entered the lines of the Union armies in the conquered land of the Confederacy. Congress opened the Union army to Black men to fight in the field. The federal government recognized the independence of the republics of Haiti and Liberia. And finally, a treaty with Britain cemented the abolition of the slave trade.

Marx ended his August 9, 1862, *Die Presse* article with this prediction: “Thus no matter how the dice may fall in the fortunes of war, even now it can safely be said that Negro slavery will not long outlive the Civil War.”¹⁴ Marx was confident that the revolutionary wave was leading to the destruction of slavery, even before Lincoln penned the Emancipation Proclamation.

Although Marx was more hopeful of the prospects of an eventual Union victory, Engels was not. The Civil War lasted four years, with a combined total of at least 620,000 dead from combat and disease. The first two years of the war did not go well for the Union in the Eastern Theater. On September 9, 1862, Engels, the specialist in military affairs, wrote to Marx that after the substantial Confederate victory at the Second Battle of Bull Run, the South was running roughshod over the Union. Engels ended his letter with a question: Did Marx still believe that the North would crush the Southern rebellion? Marx, while acknowledging that Engels knew a great deal more on the specific military matters, saw the war in a greater totality. Marx replied on September 10, 1862:

As regards the Yankees, I am assuredly still of my previous opinion that the North will finally prevail; certainly the Civil War may go through all sorts of episodes, even armistices, perhaps, and be long drawn out. The South would and could only conclude peace on condition that it received the border slave states. In this event California would also fall to it; the Northwest would follow, and the entire Federation, with perhaps the exception of the New England states, would form a single country once more, this time under the acknowledged supremacy of the slaveholders. It would be the reconstruction of the United States on the basis demanded by the South. This, however, is impossible and will not happen.

The North can, for its part, only conclude peace if the Confederacy limits itself to the old slave states and those confined between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic. In this case the Confederacy would soon come to its blessed end. Intervening armistices, etc. on the basis of a status quo, could at most entail pauses in the prosecution of the war.

The manner in which the North wages war is only to be expected from a bourgeois republic, where fraud has so long reigned supreme. The South, an oligarchy, is better adapted thereto, particularly as it is an oligarchy where the whole of productive labor falls on the Negroes and the four millions of “white trash” are filibusterers by profession. All the same, I would wager my head that these boys come off second best, despite “Stonewall Jackson.” To be sure, it is possible that it will come to a sort of revolution in the North itself first....

It seems to me that you let yourself be swayed a little too much by the military aspects of things.¹⁵

Although Marx was right about the outcome of the war, Engels actually had an excellent understanding of the military conflict. While living across the Atlantic Ocean in Manchester, Engels grasped the essential aspects of the conflict. He described the problem with the initial three-month enlistments in the Union army and the need to adequately train raw soldiers. He described the tactical aspects of the fighting, the long range of firefights, new types of cannon, the brand new ironclad ships. Engels studied the geography of the United States, the rail lines, the rivers, and the strategic ground.¹⁶ In March 1862 he grasped the essential strategy for Union victory—the winning strategy that Union General Ulysses S. Grant enacted two years later.

Cast a glance at the geographical shape of the secessionists’ territory, with its long stretch of coast on the Atlantic Ocean and its long stretch of coast on the Gulf of Mexico. So long as the Confederates hold Kentucky and Tennessee, the whole formed a great compact mass. The loss of both these states drives an enormous wedge into their territory, separating the states on the North Atlantic Ocean from the States on the Gulf of Mexico. The direct route from Virginia and the two Carolinas to Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and even, in part, to Alabama leads through Tennessee, which is now occupied by the Unionists. The sole route that, after the complete conquest of Tennessee by the Union, connects the two sections of the slave states goes through Georgia. This proves that Georgia is the key to the secessionists’ territory. With the loss of Georgia the Confederacy would be cut in two sections, which would have lost all connections with one another...¹⁷

From the foregoing considerations it follows:

The Potomac is not the most important position in the war theatre. The seizure of Richmond and the advance of the Potomac army further South—difficult on account of the many rivers that cut across the line of march—could produce a tremendous moral effect. From a purely military standpoint, they would decide nothing.¹⁸

The successful implementation of the military strategy that Engels outlined in 1862 helped to turn the tide of the war. The fall of Atlanta in August 1864 (“Georgia is the key to the secessionists’ territory”) assured Abraham Lincoln’s second term victory in November 1864 and began the endgame for the Confederacy.

On learning of Lincoln’s reelection, the new International Workingmen’s Association, the First International, wrote a congratulatory letter to Lincoln penned by Karl Marx. The concluding paragraphs summed up Marx’s and Engels’ position on the Civil War and its importance:

While the workingmen, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor, or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation; but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.

The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American anti-slavery war will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead the country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.¹⁹

Charles Francis Adams, son and grandson of two American presidents, and ambassador to Britain, responded to the International Workingmen's Association for the Lincoln administration, thanking it for their congratulatory address.

After Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, the loyal Tennessean Vice President Andrew Johnson, became President. The First International sent Johnson a condolence letter on the death of Abraham Lincoln, believing that Johnson would remain stern in carrying out Reconstruction. Marx thought Johnson would be a good successor for Lincoln. But Marx and Engels quickly realized that instead of enforcing justice for Blacks, including the right to vote, Johnson had a soft policy of reconciliation with former Confederate leaders and a hatred for African Americans.

With the destruction of slavery and the slaveocracy, the Northern capitalist class dominated the institutions of power. The last revolutionary acts of the US capitalist class would be incorporated in the Constitution with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. These amendments abolished slavery throughout the country with no compensation to the former slave-owners, and granted citizenship to all people born or naturalized in the United States, with the right to vote and hold public office. For a generation, African Americans fought to preserve the gains won in the Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction Era. Eventually white supremacists would win out in the South, yet they could never bring back slavery.

With slavery's defeat, the epochal struggle between capital and labor emerged into full view. Infamous capitalists of the Gilded Age started to amass their fortunes in the Civil War, and their wealth would grow tremendously in the following decades. Huge factories, employing thousands of workers, sprang up, as the United States began its climb to become the world’s leading economic power. As Marx would famously write in first volume of *Capital*, “In the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in black skin. However, a new life immediately arose after the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours’ agitation.”²⁰

Slavery was destroyed, the plantation owners crushed as a class, but the war against racism wasn’t over. Blacks had armed themselves and fought their former masters on the battlefield. The Civil War destroyed slavery, but not racism and inequality. The coming war between labor and capital, between the wealthy robber barons and the emerging working class, was rumbling close on the horizon.

-
1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 4. John Brown was a leader of revolutionary abolitionists, both white and Black, who attacked and seized the military arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Those that survived the attempt, John Brown included, were executed.
 2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 19 (New York: International Publishers, 2009), 373. Hereafter referred to as MECW. Many of the articles quoted here are available from the Marxist Internet Archive at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/v...
 3. MECW, 34.

4. MECW, 39.
5. MECW, 40–41.
6. MECW, 89.
7. MECW, 111.
8. MECW, 137.
9. MECW, 249–250.
10. John G. Nicolay, *The Outbreak of Rebellion* (Cambridge, Mass. Da Capo Press, 2005), 79.
11. MECW, 297.
12. MECW, 264.
13. MECW, 227–228.
14. MECW, 229.
15. MECW, 254–255.
16. Engels discussed my own hometown of Cincinnati, which, in 1862, was threatened by Confederate advances.
17. MECW, 194.
18. MECW, 194–195.
19. MECW, 281.
20. Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 415.