

Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln: A Curious Convergence*

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Abstract

Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln held very different views on the 'social question'. This essay explores the way in which they converged in their estimation of slavery during the course of the Civil War; Marx was an ardent abolitionist, and Lincoln came to see this position as necessary. It is argued that the rôle of runaway slaves – called 'contraband' – and German-revolutionary '48ers played a significant rôle in the radicalisation of Lincoln and the direction of the War.

Keywords

American Civil War, slavery, Marx, Abraham Lincoln, nationalism, 'contraband', emancipation

Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln were almost diametrically opposed in their attitude towards what was called at the time the 'social question'. Lincoln happily represented railroad-corporations as a lawyer. As a politician, he was a champion of free wage-labour and the market-revolution. Karl Marx, on the other hand, was a declared foe of capitalism, who insisted that wage-labour was in fact wage-slavery since the worker was compelled by economic necessity to sell his defining human attribute – his labour-power – because if he did not his family would soon face hunger and homelessness.

Of course, Marx's critique of capitalism did not deny that it had progressive features, and Lincoln's championing of the world of business did not extend to those whose profits stemmed directly from slaveholding. Both men placed a concept of unrewarded labour at the centre of their political philosophy, and

* This article is based on a lecture marking the bicentenary of Lincoln's birth given as part of a series organised by the History Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in October 2009. I would like to thank David Levine and his colleagues for the invitation and for many helpful comments (while naturally absolving them from responsibility for particular judgements or mistakes).

both opposed slavery on the grounds that it was intensively exploitative. Lincoln believed it to be his duty to defend the Union, which he saw as a providential experiment in representative democracy that must be defended by whatever means should prove necessary. Marx saw the democratic republic as the political form that would allow the working class to develop its capacity to lead society as a whole, albeit that he regarded US political institutions as very flawed. With their ‘corruption’ and ‘humbug’, they lent a popular veneer to the rule of the wealthy – with special privileges for slaveholders. Lincoln believed that the genius of the US Constitution could cage and contain the ‘Slave Power’, until such time as it might be possible to wind it up.

In this article, I wish to explore why two men who occupied very different worlds, and held contrary views, nevertheless coincided on an issue of historic importance and even brought those worlds into fleeting contact with one another. I wish to scrutinise the choices and opportunities that the Civil War posed for Marx and the supporters of the International in both Europe and the United States. The Civil War and its immediate sequel had a larger impact on Marx than is often realised – and likewise, the ideas of Marx and Engels had a greater impact on the United States, a country famous for its imperviousness to socialism, than is usually allowed.

It is, of course, well-known that Karl Marx was an enthusiastic supporter of the Union in the US Civil War and that, on behalf of the International Workingmen’s Association, he drafted a message of support to Abraham Lincoln on the occasion of the latter’s re-election in 1864 and that the US Ambassador in London conveyed a polite but very brief response from the president. But the antecedents and implications of this little exchange are rarely considered.

By the close of 1864 many European liberals and radicals were coming round to supporting the North, but Marx had done so from the outset. To begin with, the cause of the South had a definite appeal to liberals and radicals, partly because many of them distrusted strong states and championed the right of small nations to self-determination. Lincoln himself insisted in 1861 that the North was fighting to defend the Union, not to free the slaves. Many European liberals were impressed by the fact that the secessions had been carried out by reasonably democratic assemblies; admittedly the Southern slaves had no say in the matter, but then very few blacks in the loyal states had a vote either, and many remained slaves. There were also minority currents in the European labour and socialist movement who preferred Southern agrarianism to the commercial society of the North.

If the Civil War was not about the defence of slavery then the pure argument from Unionism was a weak one. Progressive opinion in Europe was not at all

disturbed when Belgium separated from the Netherlands in 1830, or later, in 1905, when Norway split from Sweden. Had the Netherlands or Sweden resorted to war to defend these unions they would have been widely condemned. Marx himself denounced Britain's dominion over Ireland against the wishes of its people. In December 1860 Horace Greeley, the radical editor of the *New York Tribune*, a paper to which Marx frequently contributed, declared that the secession was wrong, but should not be resisted by military means. Veteran abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison initially welcomed secession as it would, they believed, weaken the baleful power of slavery over the Federal state. For many outside of North America, the attitude to the War greatly depended on whether or not slavery was seen as a crucial stake in the conflict. Some members of the British government inclined to recognise the Confederacy and if they had done so this would have been a major boost to the South. But ever since 1807, when Britain had abolished its Atlantic slave-trade, the British government had made suppression of slave-trafficking central to the Pax Britannica. When Lord Palmerston, as Foreign Secretary or prime minister, negotiated a free-trade agreement with an Atlantic state he invariably accompanied it with a treaty banning slave-trading. If it became apparent that the Confederacy really was fighting simply to defend slavery it would be extraordinarily difficult for the London government to recognise it.

Marx as critic of economic explanations of the War

From the beginning, Marx was intensely scornful of those who supported what he saw as basically a slaveholders' revolt. He insisted that it was quite erroneous to claim, as some did, that this was a quarrel about economic policy. Summarising what he saw as the wrong-headed view espoused by influential British voices, he wrote:¹

The war between North and South [they claim] is a mere tariff war, a war between a tariff system and a free trade system, and England naturally stands on the side of free trade. It was reserved to the *Times* [of London] to make this brilliant discovery... *The Economist* expounded the theme further... Yes[, they argued,] it would be different if the war was waged for the abolition of slavery! The question of slavery, however, [they claim] has absolutely nothing to do with this war.

Then, as now, *The Economist* was a quintessentially liberal publication.

1. Marx 1961.

Marx's unhesitating option for the North did not mean that he was unaware of its grave defects as a champion of free labour. He openly attacked the timidity of its generals and the venality of many of its public servants. Nevertheless, he saw the Civil War as a decisive turning-point in nineteenth-century history. A victory for the North would set the scene for slave-emancipation and a great step forward for the workers' cause on both sides of the Atlantic. Support for the North was a touchstone-issue, he believed, and it became central to his efforts to build the International Workingmen's Association.

Marx's political choice stemmed from an early analysis of the roots of the War, which refused to define it in the terms first adopted by the belligerents themselves. Marx's well-known conviction that politics was rooted in antagonistic social relations led him to focus on structural features of the two sections, and the emergence therein of contradictory interests and forms of social life. Marx and Engels were quite well-informed about US developments. Many of their friends and comrades had emigrated to the United States in the years of reaction after the failure of the European democratic revolutions in 1848. With few exceptions, those émigrés went to the North, especially the Northwest, not the South. Marx and Engels kept up an intense correspondence with the émigrés, and wrote for, and read, their newspapers.

Marx and Engels were well-aware of the privileged position of slaveholders in the structure of the US state, but believed that it was menaced by the growth of the North and Northwest. Lincoln's election was a threat to a Southern stranglehold over the republic's central institutions, as embodied in Supreme Court judgements, Congressional alignments, fugitive-slave legislation and gag-acts. In July 1861 Marx wrote to Engels: 'I have come to the conclusion that the conflict between the South and the North – for 50 years the latter has been climbing down, making one concession after another – has at last been brought to a head... by the weight which the extraordinary development of the North Western states has thrown into the scales. The population there, with its rich admixture of newly arrived Germans and Englishmen and, moreover, largely made up of self-working farmers, did not, of course, lend itself so readily to intimidation as the gentlemen of Wall Street and the Quakers of Boston.'²

One might wish this expressed a little more delicately and appreciatively – the Quakers had played a courageous rôle in resisting the slaveholders – but it is quite true that many of the Germans and English who sought refuge in the United States after 1848 brought with them a secular radicalism that changed

2. Marx 1985, p. 114.

and strengthened the antislavery cause in the United States by broadening its base of support. Before considering the nature of what might be called the German corrective, it will be helpful to look at the evolution of Marx's analysis.

The clear premise of Marx's argument is that the North was expanding at a faster pace than the South – as indeed it was. But Marx contends that it is the South that is consumed by the need to expand territorially. The expansion of the North and Northwest, as Marx well knew, was a reflection of a momentous process of capitalist industrialisation. The South might talk about 'King Cotton', but the truth was that Southern growth was not at all as broadly based as that in the North. Cotton-exports grew, but little else.

The South had three motives for expansion in Marx's view. Firstly, its agriculture was exhaustive and so planters were constantly in quest of new land. Secondly, the slave-states needed to maintain their veto-power in the Senate, and for this purpose needed to mint new slave-states just as fast as new 'free' states were recognised. Thirdly, the numerous class of restive young white men anxious to make their fortune persuaded the leaders of Southern society that they must find an external outlet for them if they were not to become disruptive domestically.³

By itself, the argument that there was a shortage of land in the South has limited validity. The building of further railroads could have brought more lands into cultivation. Alternatively, the planters could have made better use of fertilisers, as did planters in Cuba. If there was a shortage, it was a shortage of slaves – relative to the boom in the cotton-plantation economy of the 1850s.

Combined with the third point – the mass of restless filibusters – the shortage-argument gained more purchase. There was no absolute shortage of land and slaves, but planters could only offer so much to their children. Southern whites had large families and there was a surplus of 'younger sons' who wished to make their way in the world. In the 1850s these young men – with what Marx called their 'turbulent longings' – had been attracted to 'filibustering' – expeditions aimed at Cuba and Nicaragua – just as similar adventurers had sought glory and fortunes in Texas and Mexico. Their parents might not always approve of freelance methods but did see the attraction of acquiring new lands.

Undoubtedly, Marx's clinching argument was that which referred to political factors: 'In order to maintain its influence in the Senate and, through the Senate its hegemony over the United States, the South therefore requires a

3. Marx 1961, pp. 57–70.

continual formation of new slave states. This, however, was only possible through conquest of foreign lands as in the case of Texas and through the transformation of the territories belonging to the United States, first into slave territories and then into slave states.⁴ Marx concluded: ‘The whole movement was and is based, as one sees, on the *slave question*. Not in the sense of whether the slaves in the existing slave states should be emancipated or not, but whether twenty million free men of the North should subordinate themselves any longer to an oligarchy of three hundred thousand slaveholders.’⁵

As social science and as journalism this might be impressive, but it did not bring Marx to the political conclusion at which he aimed. The political subordination of Northerners was not the equivalent of slavery and might even be alleviated by Southern secession. Marx further insisted that it was folly to imagine that the slaveholders would be satisfied by Northern recognition of the Confederacy. Rather, it would open the way to an aggressive South that would strive to incorporate the border-states and ensure slaveholder-hegemony throughout North America. He reminded his readers that it was under Southern leadership that the Union had sought to introduce ‘the armed propaganda of slavery in Mexico, Central and South America.’⁶ The seizure of Spanish Cuba, with its flourishing slave-system, had long been a prominent Southern goal.

Marx’s real argument and belief was that two social systems confronted one another – the system of slavery and the system of free labour: ‘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.’⁷ In this mortal struggle the North, however moderate its initial inclinations, would eventually be driven to revolutionary measures.

Marx believed that the polity favoured by the Southern slave-owners was very different from the republic aspired to by Northerners. He did not spell out all his reasons, but he was essentially right about this. Southern slaveholders wished to see a Federal state that would uphold slave-property, that would return and deter slave-runaways, as laid down in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and that would allow Southerners a fair share of Federal territories. The planters were happy that the antebellum US-Federal state was modest in size

4. Marx 1961, p. 68. Here I only briefly explain and evaluate Marx’s analysis of the origins of the Civil War, though the texts I have cited clearly enough reject economic reductionism. Marx’s stress on the centrality of political issues can be compared with that found in Moore 1966. For a recent account using many of Marx’s concepts, see Ashworth 2007.

5. Marx 1961, p. 68.

6. Marx 1961, p. 71.

7. Marx and Engels 1984, p. 50.

and competence, since it meant low taxes and little or no interference with their ‘peculiar institution’. They did not favour either high tariffs or expensive internal improvements. But this restricted view of the state was accompanied by provisions that affected the lives of citizens of Northern states in quite intimate ways. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required all citizens to cooperate with the Federal marshals in apprehending runaways. In the Southern view, slaveholders should be free to bring slaves to Federal territories, something seen as an unwelcome and unfair intrusion by migrants from the Northern states, whether they were antislavery or simply anti-black. Southerners also favoured censorship of the Federal mail, denying its use for abolitionist literature. They supported a foreign policy that pursued future acquisitions suitable for plantation-development. But they did not want a state that had the power to intervene in the special internal arrangements of the slave-states themselves. For them a Republican president, with the power to appoint thousands of Federal officials in the Southern states, and with no intention of suppressing radical abolitionists, spelt great danger.

As a Whig who had been brought up in Kentucky and Southern Illinois, Lincoln was quite familiar with the tensions of the borderlands between South and North. He and his wife had close relatives who were slaveholders, with one of his wife’s uncles owning 48 slaves. Lincoln was ready to acknowledge the legal and constitutional rights of slaveholders, but at the same time he opposed the streak of lawlessness in the behaviour of the slaveholders and their Northern allies. In his first major speech, delivered in 1838 to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, he denounced the lynching of blacks and the shooting of an abolitionist editor. These events violated the rule of law which should be every citizen’s ‘political religion’.⁸ He also insisted that it would be perfectly constitutional for Congress to end slavery in the Federal district at Washington. Lincoln believed that means should be found gradually to emancipate the slaves, with compensation for their owners and with the former slaves being helped to settle in Africa. A number of Whig slaveholders, notably Henry Clay, a man much admired by Lincoln, advocated what was known as the ‘colonisation’ of African-Americans, treating them as aliens in the land where most of them were born. Lincoln’s support for colonisation separated him from the main currents of abolitionism, but his concern for the integrity of the Federal state, his early disapproval of the lawlessness of the defenders of slavery, and his distaste for the slaveholders’ demand for special treatment, were all signal themes which, in a more developed form, were to be taken up by the Republican Party of the 1850s. Unlike the Radicals, he did

8. Foner 2010.

not fulminate against the ‘Slave Power’, but he did nourish a new and more demanding ideal of the nation and the Republic. Whereas antebellum US national feeling characteristically deferred to the slaveholders, the Republicans sponsored a new vision of the nation, which challenged the South’s burgeoning sense of exceptionalism.

Marx did not directly compare the claims of North and South as competing nationalisms. Instead, he questioned whether the South was a nation. He wrote: “‘The South’, however, is neither a territory strictly detached from the North geographically, nor a moral unity. It is not a country at all but a battle slogan.”⁹ Many who were much closer to the situation than Marx entered the same judgement in the years before 1861, yet soon had to acknowledge that the Confederacy did rapidly acquire many of the ideological trappings of a nation complete with a claimed ‘moral unity’ based on exaltation of the racial conceits and values of a slave-society, and of the conviction that white Southerners were the true Americans. Their values were a strange mixture of traditional patriotism and paternalism and – for whites alone – libertarianism. Hundreds of thousands of white Southerners who owned no slaves nevertheless fought and died for the rebellion, seeing the Confederacy as the embodiment of their racial privileges and rural civilisation. The rebels were fighting for a cause that embodied a way of life. Within the Union, most slaveholders had championed minimal taxation and extensive ‘states’ rights’. The mass of slaveless Southern whites not only had the vote, but enjoyed the ‘freedom of the range’, that is to say that they could graze their animals and hunt on vast tracts of public land and uncultivated private land. This privilege allowed them to live, as they put it, ‘high on the hog’, shooting wild pig and other game. Engels pointed out to Marx that the secession-movement had popular backing throughout much of the South.¹⁰ Of course, blacks were excluded from the political process, but so too were they in most parts of the North.

Southern nationalism itself responded to, and stimulated, Unionist or Yankee nationalism. The new steam-presses poured out a torrent of newspapers, magazines and novels, all of them summoning up rival imagined communities.¹¹ Print-capitalism was rendered even more dynamic by cable and rail-communications. While Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* moved the Northern reader to tears, it seemed a grotesque libel to Southerners. The North’s imagined community could not embrace the slaveholder, let alone the degraded slave-trader. The South recoiled in fear and outrage from the abolitionist and the radical newspaper-editor, with their slurs on Southern

9. Marx and Engels 1961, p. 72.

10. Engels 1961, p. 326.

11. Anderson 1996.

honour and their open support for slave-runaways and resistance. That incompatible national imaginings played a part in precipitating the conflict by no means takes away from the underlying discrepancy between two social formations which gave birth to such imaginings.

That the Civil War was an ‘irrepressible conflict’, that its roots lay in the different labour-régimes of the two sections, and that it crystallised in opposing images of the good society, are not novel propositions. Different versions of them have been entertained by, among many others, such notable historians as David Potter, Don Fehrenbacher, Eric Foner, Eugene Genovese, and John Ashworth.¹² Marxists who have studied the origins of the US Civil War have, like Marx himself, been drawn to seeing the conflict as one that concerned not rival economic interests but the wider political and ideological presuppositions of the social order of the two sections. Indeed, manufacturers and merchants in Europe and the North had no objection to doing business with Southern planters. The clash was instead rooted in the apparent class-antagonism between slaveowners and free or independent workers. Southern ideologues saw Northern wage-labourers as suffering a humiliating dependence, contrasted with the ‘freedom of the range’ and recognition enjoyed by Southern whites. The ‘free-labour ideology’ of the Northern Free Soilers and Republicans instead stressed that the industrious Northern worker had the prospect of becoming an artisan, small master, professional or farmer. The availability of land for settlement in the Federal territories was a part of this promise. The availability of good public education also helped to lend substance to the prospect of social mobility and artisanal improvement. Such Southern values as martial valour, patriotism and honour became pitted against Northern ideals of improvement and industry because the social relations which produced them demanded different political structures if they were to be sustained and reproduced.

The idea that rival nationalisms played their part is an extension of such views, but Daniel Crofts points to the difficulty of pinpointing the exact moment of their birth:

It is tempting to project back onto the prewar months the fiercely-aroused nationalisms that appeared in mid-April [1861]. To do so would not be entirely in error, but it invites distortion. The irreconcilably antagonistic North and South described by historians such as Foner and Genovese were much easier to detect after April 15. Then and only then could Northerners start to think in terms of a conflict urged on behalf of ‘the general interests of self-government’ and the hopes of humanity and the interests of freedom among all peoples and for ages to come.¹³

12. Potter 1976; Genovese 1967; Foner 1970; Ashworth 1995; Ashworth 2007.

13. Crofts 2005, p. 197.

But the terms cited in this account grant too much to Unionist rhetoric. The Union's war-aim was quite simply the preservation of the Union, not 'the interests of self-government', an idea to which the Confederacy also had a claim. Both rival nationalisms had a markedly expansive character, the Unionist being continental at this stage and the Confederacy one which craved new slave-territories to the South (notably Cuba) and West. The clash was thus one of rival empires as well as competing nationalisms.

National feeling does not validate oppression. Abraham Lincoln had enunciated principles which had a direct bearing on the South's right to self-determination when he declared the following:

The doctrine of self government is right – absolutely and eternally right – but it has no just application, as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such just application depends upon whether a negro is not or is a man. If he is not a man, why in that case, he who is a man may, as a matter of self-government, do just as he pleases with him. But if the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern himself? When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs another man, that is more than self-government – that is despotism. If the negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that 'all men are created equal,' and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another.¹⁴

Lincoln had uttered these words in 1854 in connection with the dispute over the right of communities in the Federal territories to establish themselves as newly formed states. However attractive or compelling Lincoln's argument might seem, it could only be urged in favour of Northern resistance to secession if the North had itself repudiated slavery. But Lincoln and the majority of Republicans expressly condoned the survival of slavery in the Union, and only opposed its extension to the Federal territories. Once elected, Lincoln's main concern was to court the slaveholding border-states and make sure that as few of them as possible backed the rebellion. His success in this became the source of his caution in moving against slavery. Amending the Constitution in order to outlaw slavery would, in any case, require the support of large qualified majorities in Congress and from the states. Given that the slaves of the South

14. Abraham Lincoln, speech in Peoria (Illinois) on 16 October 1854, responding to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The quote from the Declaration of Independence strikes a patriotic note, though some might conclude that the speech also invalidated the break of 1776, given the prominence of slavery in several North-American slave-colonies. No doubt Lincoln would have insisted that the objection was not available to George III and his governments, since they were massively implicated in slavery, and that at least the Founding Fathers were uneasy about the institution.

were worth more than all the machines, factories, wharves, railroads and farm-buildings of the North put together there was no prospect of offering compensation. Lincoln observed in his Inaugural Address that the only major difference between the sections referred to slavery's expansion.

Many US historians treat the Northern decision to go to war in a fatalistic way, echoing Lincoln's own later phrase, 'And the war came'.¹⁵ The Unionist cause – US or American nationalism – is simply taken for granted as an absolute value needing no further justification. However, Sean Wilentz takes a bolder line, taking his cue from the First Inaugural:

above and beyond the slavery issue, Lincoln unflinchingly defended certain basic ideals of freedom and democratic self-government, which he asserted he had been elected to vindicate. There was, he said, a single 'substantial dispute' in the sectional crisis: 'one section of our country believes that slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended'. There could be no doubt about where Lincoln stood, and where his administration would stand, on that fundamental moral question.¹⁶

But Lincoln's formula was deliberately weak. If slavery really was a moral outrage then he should have said that slavery was 'wrong *and ought to be abolished*'. As for whether there could be doubt about where Lincoln stood, it is a simple fact that many of his contemporaries, especially the Radicals and abolitionists, did indeed doubt him and his administration.

If the new president could not come out more clearly against slavery then he could scarcely claim that it was the overriding issue in the War to suppress the rebellion. Lincoln was satisfied that the cause of the Union, and his oath of office, were fully self-sufficient and amply justified resistance to rebellion. To underline that secession was rebellion he waited until a Federal installation had been attacked before ordering military action.

15. The phrase 'And the war came', taken from Lincoln's Second Inaugural, has been adopted for many valuable accounts, but its implicit denial of Northern agency fails to acknowledge the emergence of a new nationalism or to pinpoint the Union's legitimacy-deficit in 1861–2 and hence a vital factor impelling the President to remedy it. See, for example, Stamp 1970; Crofts 2005; McPherson 2007, p. 17.

16. Wilentz 2005, p. 783. Wilentz proceeds from these remarks to the conclusion: 'the only just and legitimate way to settle the matter [i.e. the difference over slavery-extension], Lincoln insisted... was through a deliberate democratic decision made by the citizenry.' (Wilentz 2005, p. 763.) A riposte to this is suggested by Louis Menand's observation: 'the Civil War was a vindication, as Lincoln had hoped it would be, of the American experiment. Except for one thing, which is that people who live in democratic societies are not supposed to settle their disagreements by killing one another.' (Menand 2001, p. x.)

Lincoln opposed the filibustering of Southern adventurers but had been committed to consolidation. He had opposed the Mexican War, but in 1848 he had strongly supported the presidential campaign of General Zachary Taylor, a slaveholder and victor over the Mexicans. William Seward, shortly to become Lincoln's Secretary of State, broadly hinted at another powerful consideration, namely the damage that secession would do to the global projection of US power. Speaking in the Senate in January 1861, he declared:

The American man-of-war is a noble spectacle. I have seen it enter an ancient port in the Mediterranean. All the world wondered at it and talked about it. Salvoes of artillery, from forts and shipping in the harbour, saluted its flag. Princes and princesses and merchants paid it homage, and all the people blessed it as a harbinger of hope for their own ultimate freedom... I imagine now the same noble vessel entering the same haven. The flag of thirty-three stars and thirteen stripes has been drawn down, and in its place a signal is run up, which flaunts the device of a lone star or a palmetto tree. Men ask, 'Who is the stranger that thus steals into our waters?' The answer contemptuously given is: 'She comes from one of the obscure republics of North America. Let her pass on.'¹⁷

The secession of a limited number of rural states would, in this view, not simply diminish US power, or hand over control of the Mississippi, but would spell the end of the 'empire of liberty'. Seward was speaking in the Senate and addressing his remarks as much to moderate Southerners, who could be deterred from joining the secession-movement, as to Northerners. If there had been a compromise, and some sort of nominal union had been salvaged, we can be pretty sure that it would have been sealed by territorial expansion – most likely the seizure of Cuba.

The Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, also sought to play down the defence of slavery as the motive for the conflict and instead to harp on the Northern threat to states' rights and on the affronts that had been offered to Southern honour. He stressed continuity between the ideals of the American Revolution and their supposed latter-day embodiment in the Confederacy. The Confederate Constitution was closely modelled on that of 1787. Davis's Vice President, Alexander Stephens, was not so careful and the nature of the conflict itself was steadily to highlight the dependence on slavery. The exigencies of war forced the Confederacy to tax and requisition the wealth of its citizens – and to flout states' rights – on a grand scale.

17. Quoted in Bensel 1990, p. 18. For an account of Seward's expansionist plans and their frustration by the larger processes set in motion by the Civil War, see LaFeber 1963, pp. 24–32.

Of course, dissidents in the North claimed that Lincoln and the Republicans rode roughshod over republican liberties, but this was in the service of a Unionist nationalism to which many Democrats as well as Republicans also subscribed. As the conflict proceeded, the salience of slavery in Southern society itself became of decisive importance, creating severe problems for the Confederacy and becoming a target of Unionist strategy. The Confederacy's very belated attempt to free a few hundred slaves and enrol them in a coloured militia came much too late to have any impact, and still rested on a racial compact. But implicitly it conceded that the South had built on a faulty foundation.

The German-Americans

Let us return to the sources of the conflict and the nature of the Republican threat. The Civil War crisis was, of course, precipitated by the growth of the Republican Party and the election of a Republican president. Lincoln would be able to make a host of appointments, including many in the Southern states themselves. He would be able to veto legislation and give orders to the executive apparatus. Moreover, civil society in the North had become tolerant of provocations escalating from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry. While Southern leaders abominated religious abolitionism, they were even more alarmed at the growth of a secular Republican politics that could win Northern majorities and use these to dominate the state.

This brings us to the too-often neglected contribution of the German-Americans. Bruce Levine's study, *The Spirit of 1848*, shows the transformative impact of the huge German immigration of around the mid-century.¹⁸ At this time, immigration was rising to new heights and Germans comprised between a third and a half all newcomers. In the single year 1853 over a quarter-of-a-million German immigrants arrived. The German-Americans soon became naturalised and an important pool of votes for those who knew how to woo them. To begin with, Democratic rhetoric had some impact, but, by the mid-1850s, many German-Americans were attracted to the Republicans, and themselves helped to make Republicanism and antislavery more broadly attractive.

Protestant evangelicalism strongly influenced US abolitionism. The evangelical repudiation of slavery was very welcome, but eventually too-close an association served to limit the antislavery appeal. The evangelicals twinned antislavery with temperance and Protestantism, and this diminished the appeal of

18. Levine 1992.

abolitionism in the eyes of many Catholics and not a few free-thinkers. Already in the 1830s, William Lloyd Garrison and William Channing sought to root the antislavery critique in more rationalist varieties of Protestant Christianity. English immigrants also inclined to antislavery.¹⁹ But the large-scale German immigration greatly strengthened the secular culture of antislavery. With their breweries, beer-gardens, musical concerts and *Turnverein* [exercise-clubs], the German radicals furnished a strong secular current of antislavery, and even the German Protestants had concerns which differentiated them from the US Methodists and Baptists.

The temperance-cause loomed large for evangelicals, but had no charm for German and Nordic immigrants. The more radical German-Americans supported women's rights and female suffrage, with Mathilda Anneke publishing a German-language women's paper. Margarete Schurz was influential in the introduction of public kindergartens. Sometimes Marx's German-American followers are portrayed as deferring to the prejudices of white, male trade-unionists, but this is unfair. When Joseph Wedemeyer, Marx's long-time friend and comrade, helped to found the American Workers' League [*Amerikanische Arbeitersbund*] in 1853, its founding statement of principles declared that 'all workers who live in the United States without distinction of occupation, language, color, or sex can become members'.²⁰ Today such a formula sounds entirely conventional, but in 1853 it was very fresh. Indeed, this may be the first occasion on which a workers' organisation adopted it. The revolutionary German-Americans did not invent this stance all by themselves, but did readily adopt a critique of racial and gender-exclusion pioneered by radical abolitionists.

The mass of German-Americans were naturally hostile to the nativist chauvinism of the Know Nothings. The Republican Party only emerged as the dominant force in the North in the 1850s by defeating the Know Nothings (or American Party), and repudiating its own nativist temptation. While some

19. The over-representation of British immigrants in the ranks of antislavery activists in the 1830s is brought out in Richards 1978.

20. Levine 1992, p. 125. In later decades some German-Americans did indeed soft-pedal women's rights when seeking to recruit Irish-American trade-unionists, but, while this should be duly noted, it is far from characterising all German-Americans, whether followers of Marx or not. For an interesting study, which sometimes veers towards caricature, see Messer-Kruse 1998. This author has a justifiable pride in the native American radical tradition and some valid criticisms of some of the positions adopted by German-American 'Marxists' but is so obsessed with pitting the two ethnic political cultures against one another that he fails to notice how effectively they often combined, especially in the years 1850–70. See Buhle 1991 for a more balanced assessment.

Republican leaders flirted with nativist prejudice, the party itself attacked – even demonised – ‘the Slave Power’, and not the immigrants. The presence of hundreds of thousands of German-American voters helped to ensure this orientation.

As the Civil War unfolded German-Americans, and their overseas friends, continued to furnish vital support to the Northern cause. Eventually 200,000 Germans fought for the Union, with 36,000 fighting in German-speaking units. Carl Schurz became a major-general, and later a senator. Fritz Sigel and Alexander Schimmelfennig became generals. Marx’s friend and collaborator Joseph Wedemeyer was a colonel, and served as a staff-officer in St Louis for Frémont. Two other members of the Communist League who also became Unionist officers were August Willich and Fritz Anneke. Indeed, the correspondence of Marx and Engels is studded with references to the military progress of these friends and acquaintances.

The military resources represented by the wider German-American enrolment were very significant, but the same could be said of the Irish-American contingents which grew to be just as large. The German-Americans brought with them an openness to the antislavery idea which was to promote a new sense of the character of the War and the way it should be fought. Reviewing a recent collection of hundreds of letters written by German-American volunteers, Kenneth Barkin writes: ‘the major reason for volunteering [for the Union army] was to bring slavery to an end.’²¹ This new research very much vindicates Levine’s argument in *The Spirit of 1848*.

Civil War strategy and politics

The veterans of 1848 saw themselves as social revolutionaries, but also as exponents of a national idea and movement. Whatever their ambivalence – and it was considerable – they were aware of the lessons of the Napoleonic epoch and of the nationalist renewal which it had provoked in Germany. One of the most striking expressions of this movement had been the doctrines of Carl von Clausewitz – the contention that war was the continuation of politics by other means, the attention to moral factors, and the insistence on the priority of destroying the enemy’s main army, rather than capturing territory or capital cities. Clausewitz’s magnum opus, *On War*, had been published in 1832 and its ideas had currency amongst the 1848 veterans. Unionist military strategy at first

21. Barkin 2008, p. 71.

ignored the Clausewitzian imperatives, and instead preferred the more static doctrine of Antoine Jomini, a Swiss military theorist.²²

Lincoln had gone to great lengths to promote the widest possible alliance in defence of the Union, accommodating moderates and making concessions to slaveholders in the border-states. But by the summer of 1862 lack of progress, heavy casualties and the cautious and defensive conduct of the War was inspiring mounting criticism and a greater willingness to listen to abolitionists and Radical Republicans, who argued for a bolder strategy, both militarily and politically.

The more Marx learned about militant abolitionism, the more impressed he was. In an article for *Die Presse* of 9 August 1862, Marx wrote of the growing attention paid in the North to abolitionist orators, and, in particular, to Wendell Phillips, who ‘for thirty years... has without intermission and at the risk of his life proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves as his battle cry’.²³ He paraphrases at length a speech by Phillips ‘of the highest importance’ in which the veteran abolitionist indicts Lincoln’s conservative and cowardly policy:

The government [of Lincoln] fights for the maintenance of slavery and therefore it fights in vain... He [Lincoln] waits... for the nation to take him in hand and sweep away slavery through him... If the war is continued in this fashion it is a useless squandering of blood and gold... Dissolve this Union in God’s name and put another in its place, on the cornerstone of which is written: ‘Political equality for all the citizens in the world’... Let us hope that the war lasts long enough to transform us into men and then we shall quickly triumph. God has put the thunderbolt of emancipation into our hands in order to crush the rebellion.²⁴

Marx and Engels had from the outset insisted on the War’s antislavery logic, but the first eighteen months of the conflict tested their conviction. Engels was particularly distressed by the passivity and defensiveness of the Union commanders, and beyond that what he called ‘the slackness and obtuseness’ that appeared throughout the North, the lack of popular zeal for the republic, contrasting with the daring and energy of the rebels. On 7 August, Marx urged his friend not to be over-influenced by the ‘military aspect’ of matters. Lincoln’s Provisional Emancipation Proclamation was issued in September 1862 and its coming into force in January 1863 began to inject a vital new ingredient.

On 29 October, following the announcement of the Provisional Proclamation, Marx was powerfully reassured. He wrote:

22. Gallagher 1998.

23. Marx and Engels 1984, pp. 233–4.

24. Marx and Engels 1961, pp. 202–6.

The fury with which the Southerners have received Lincoln's [Emancipation] Acts proves their importance. All Lincoln's Acts appear like the pettifogging conditions which one lawyer puts to his opposing lawyer. But this does not alter their historic content. Indeed it amuses me when I compare them with the drapery in which the Frenchman envelops even the most unimportant point.²⁵

Thereafter Marx and Engels had growing confidence in Lincoln, even if they continued to complain about the quality of the Union's military leadership and the need for a thoroughgoing shake-up in the republic's ruling institutions. The Proclamation of January 1863 went further than the provisional proclamation of the previous September.

Lincoln's option for the emancipation-policy was by no means a foregone conclusion. It was advocated by abolitionists and Radicals, but openly opposed by the loyal border-states and by many Democrats. Lincoln believed that maintenance of the broadest Unionist coalition was essential to victory. Democrats and moderate Republicans long-hoped to persuade the Confederacy to come to terms and, to this end, they opposed measures that would irrevocably alienate the South. While abolitionists and radical Republicans railed against Lincoln's studied moderation, it was the actions of a few thousand slave-rebels outside of the political system which helped the Radicals in Washington eventually to win the argument.²⁶ In July 1862 Congress had prepared the ground for the Emancipation Proclamation by passing the Second Confiscation Act, providing for the freeing of slaves owned by rebels and by a new Militia Act which dropped the stipulation, reaching back to 1792, that only white men could enrol.

The arrival of fugitive slaves in Union encampments surrounding the Confederacy made slavery, and its rôle in the conflict, impossible to ignore. Some Union commanders tried to return the slave-fugitives to their masters. Others found this a perverse and impractical response. General Benjamin Butler was the most senior Union commander to decide that these fugitives should not be returned and that instead they should be welcomed and put to work as auxiliaries. The legal term 'contraband' was soon adopted to explain and justify this practice, though the term awkwardly implied that the (ex-)

25. Marx and Engels 1961, p. 258.

26. Slave-resistance and black abolitionism played vital rôles in radicalising many Republicans and Union soldiers, a development that Marx and Engels anticipated but did not thereafter write much about. The thousands of fugitives of 1861 grew to as many as 400,000 by the end of the War, or a little over a tenth of the slave-population, with the remainder working to meet their own needs rather than for their owner. See Hahn 2009. The Emancipation Proclamation did not attempt the impossible task of discriminating between loyal and rebel owners inside the Confederacy, and, in practice, Union offices were often to accept refugees if they needed recruits or labourers, even if these refugees might have originated from the border-states.

slaves were confiscated rebel-property. Lincoln's initial refusal to countenance this practice provoked abolitionist agitation. Nonetheless, the swelling number of 'contrabands' exercised their own powerful pressure for an emancipation-policy.

The emancipation-policy respected the slave-property of slaveholders in the loyal border-states, in Tennessee, and in several other districts already occupied by Unionist forces. Altogether, there were around 800,000 slaves who were left in slavery while some 3.1 million would be liberated by the Proclamation's terms, so long as the Union army prevailed. The Proclamation was framed as an exercise of the president's war-powers. It justified the enrolment of 'contrabands' for civilian labour, and included a clause permitting their enrolment in fighting units. Coloured soldiers were organised in special units, under white officers, and at a lower rate of pay. Eventually the thirst for manpower of a hugely destructive war led to the enrolment of 180,000 African-Americans in the Union army and 20,000 in the Navy (by the end of the conflict, just over a hundred African-Americans had been commissioned as officers of coloured units).

The emancipation-policy greatly exacerbated the problems of the Confederacy, as it found it increasingly difficult to keep slaves working to supply the Southern armies. The emancipation-policy also helped in Europe. The fledgling labour and socialist movements were not completely united, but the most dynamic and representative currents now rallied to oppose the Confederacy. Marx and Engels based their efforts to develop the International Workingmen's Association on this trend.

Lincoln was dismayed when General Meade failed aggressively to follow up the setback inflicted on the rebels at Gettysburg. Instead, Meade issued a proclamation saying that the country 'looks to the army for greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader.' Lincoln was aghast at the discovery that he had another general who entirely failed to grasp the nationalist principle that 'the whole country is our soil.'²⁷

But above and beyond the importance of defending the whole territory of the former Union was the claim that the North was defending a new Union that would correspond more closely to the nation-state cherished by so many nineteenth-century nationalists.²⁸ In his famous address at Gettysburg, Lincoln underlined the 'new birth of freedom' that must inform and infuse the military struggle. Was this rebirth defined by slave-emancipation, or was it simply a vindication of Unionist nationalism and American 'principles of

27. McPherson 2008, p. 33.

28. For an account which seriously addresses the issue of Unionist nationalism, see Bensel 1990, pp. 18–47.

self-government? Both interpretations were available. The rebirth of the national spirit was something that many immigrants as well as natives would be able to understand, because they came from lands where the national revolution was as yet unconsummated – such as Germany and Ireland. (The Irish Fenians strongly supported the North, helping to organise a number of units.) And, as revolutionary and democratic nationalists, they were less inclined to be fixated by given political forms, such as the US Constitution. It was German-American militia in St Louis that prevented Missouri's governor from delivering the state and its huge arsenal into Confederate hands.

European nationalisms, with their dominant ethnicities and religions, had their own problems with reconciling rival concepts and recognising minorities. The Republicans had shied away from crude nativism but without embracing the radical-abolitionist call for radical innovation. The formulas offered by Lincoln at Gettysburg did not offer citizenship to the freedmen (nor to American Indians), though Northern-European Protestant immigrants somehow fitted in. Dorothy Ross urges that Gettysburg marks a step back from the universalism of the Declaration of Independence: 'Lincoln transforms a truth open to each man as man into something he shares by virtue of his partnership in the nation . . . Lincoln solved the moral conflict he faced between principles and national survival by linking human rights to national allegiance, but human rights became the subordinate partner.'²⁹

The leaders of the North faced significant opposition. The War's heavy toll on life and the North's failure to inflict decisive defeats on the Confederate forces led 'copperhead'-Democrats to hanker for peace-talks. Conscription led to violent draft-riots in New York and other urban centres, with the rioters attacking blacks as the supposed cause of the conflict. But even New England abolitionists with impeccable patriot-credentials could doubt whether war was the right way to impose their section's superior civilisation. As an avowed abolitionist and young officer who had just experienced several terrible, bloody engagements, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. – a future Chief Justice – wrote to his orthodox Republican father: 'If it is true that we represent civilization wh. is in its nature, as well as slavery, diffuse & aggressive, and if civn and progress are better things why they will conquer in the long run, we may be sure, and will stand a better chance in their proper province – peace – than in war, the brother of slavery – it is slavery's parent, child and sustainer all at once.'³⁰ What Holmes here refers to as civilisation and progress are forces that Marx would have seen as capitalism or the prevalence of bourgeois social relations.

29. Ross 2009, p. 346.

30. Menand 2001, p. 45.

The sentiments expressed point to pacifism rather than anti-imperialism. The idea is that, one way or another, the North is going to prevail, so why not do so in a kinder, gentler way? The North's ownership of the future is down to the extraordinary locomotive of its capitalist economy. Marx himself probably would have agreed that the North would prevail anyway, but would have added that 300,000 slaveholders were not going to give up their human property without a fight.

Holmes's letter was written in December 1862 at a time when the consequences and character of emancipation-policy were not yet clear. Without abandoning all of his misgivings Holmes became more committed to the War in the next year or two. According to Louis Menand, enthusiasm for abolitionism and the Union cause was boosted by the bravery of the black soldiers in the assault of Fort Wagner, revulsion from the racial attacks in New York, and, finally, the growing effectiveness of the Northern war-machine, making it seem that, at last, all the bloodshed was to some purpose after all.³¹

The adoption of the emancipation-policy itself created a new abolitionist agenda. It posed the issue of the civic status of those freed from slavery. Lincoln had repeatedly declared that slaves were part of humankind and that it was blasphemy to belittle or deny this, as he thought Stephen Douglas and other Democratic leaders did. But Lincoln's vehemence on the equal humanity of the former slaves did not mean that they were all simply Americans or that they were entitled, once released from slavery, to equal citizenship. He believed that they remained a sort of alien or stranger, and should be invited to leave North America and find a land of their own in Africa and the Caribbean.³²

In a speech at Charleston on 18 September 1858 – part of his famous debating duel with Stephen Douglas – Lincoln had insisted: 'I am not, nor have I ever been, in favour of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to inter-marry with white people.'³³ This view of the Negro and his rights was not lightly held, but it did change in the course of the War and as the challenges of 'reconstruction' presented themselves.

The address of the International to President Lincoln

It is at this point that we can consider the brief and mediated exchange between Marx and the US President. The two men were both averse to wordy rhetoric

31. Menand 2001, pp. 52–3.

32. Lincoln's long attachment to the colonisation-idea is documented in Foner 2008.

33. Holzer (ed.) 1993, p. 189. This was not an off-hand remark, but forms part of a careful introduction to his speech.

and conventional pieties, and yet both discovered an emancipatory potential in a bloody and often-sordid Civil War. Lincoln was naturally taciturn – his most important speeches were masterpieces of concision. When it came to justifying slave-emancipation, Lincoln was further bound by political and constitutional considerations, the need to retain the loyalty of the border-states, and to take only such actions as conformed to his war-powers as president. So neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor the Gettysburg address avow an abolitionist objective, even if both had an implicit antislavery message for those willing to hear it.

Lincoln's course from the Emancipation Proclamation aimed, not just to maintain and invigorate the Unionist coalition, but also to appeal to public opinion in the wider Atlantic world and to head off the inclination of the governments in Paris or London to recognise the Confederacy, or, later, to offer mediation. Lincoln's carefully constructed appeals to abolitionism were a vital part of this. Given that the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) embraced several British and French trade-unions, it evidently appeared worthy of some diplomatic acknowledgment. The General Council of the IWA asked Karl Marx to draft a message of congratulation to Lincoln on the occasion of his re-election. The Republican watchword, 'Free Labor, Free Soil, Free Men' was designed to indict the 'Slave Power' and, however vaguely, to offer rights, land and recognition to the labourer. This was not anticapitalism, but it was, in Marx's terms, a stride in the direction of the democratic and social republic.

Marx found that drafting the International's address to Lincoln was more difficult than he had anticipated: he complained to Engels that writing such a text was 'much harder [to draft] than a substantial work' since he was anxious that 'the phraseology to which this sort of scribbling is restricted should at least be distinguished from the democratic, vulgar phraseology.'³⁴ Nevertheless, he allowed himself the following resonant, if complex, paragraph: 'When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, "slavery" on the banner of armed revolt; when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century... then 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 slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labour.' The address also warned that, so long as the republic was 'defiled by slavery', so long as the Negro was

34. Marx and Engels 1961, p. 273.

‘mastered and sold without his concurrence’, and so long as it was ‘the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his own master’, they would be ‘unable to attain the true freedom of labour.’³⁵

The repeated invocation of the cause of labour in the address thus gave its own more radical twist to the ‘free labour’-argument characteristic of Lincoln and other Republicans. The address observed: ‘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 his country through matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of the social world.’³⁶

The US Ambassador to Britain, Charles Francis Adams, replied to the address on behalf of the president a month later, writing: ‘I am directed to inform you that the address of the Central Council of your Association, which was duly transmitted through this legation to the President of the United States has been received by him. So far as the sentiments expressed by it are personal, they are accepted by him with a sincere and anxious desire that he may be able to prove himself not unworthy of the confidence which has recently been extended to him by his fellow-citizens’. It went on to declare that ‘the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slavery-maintaining insurgents as the cause of human nature and that they derive new encouragement to persevere from the testimony of the working men of Europe.’³⁷ Thus both the address and the reply refer to labour with the greatest respect and both embed the rights of labour in, respectively, the ‘rights of man’ and ‘the cause of human nature’.

Douglass and Marx on Lincoln’s progress

By the time of the Second Inaugural in March 1865, Lincoln was less constrained than on earlier occasions and placed slavery as central to the conflict in a way that he had previously avoided. He gave vent to his sense of

35. Marx and Engels 1961, pp. 260–1.

36. Marx and Engels 1961, p. 281. The meanings of the address are rarely considered, which makes it the more regrettable when it is interpreted in a tendentious way, as is the case with Messer-Kruse 1998, pp. 54–6, in which he has Marx complaining at the ‘bother’ of having to write something of such little importance as the address and that he only consented to do so because: ‘In Marx’s view, slavery had to be destroyed in order to allow for the historical development of the white working class.’ (Messer-Kruse 1998, p. 54.)

37. Marx and Engels 1961, pp. 262–3.

the heavy wrong which his nation had committed by permitting an extremity of human bondage. He declared that each side in the still-unfinished conflict had looked for ‘an easier triumph’, but had not been able to contrive ‘a result less fundamental and astounding’. He saw the carnage of the War as perhaps God’s punishment for the nation’s ‘offences’, and concluded that he could only hope and pray that ‘this mighty scourge of war’ would come to a speedy end. He added: ‘Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”’.

This passage certainly put slavery at the centre, and strikingly memorialised its enormity as a system for the exploitation of labour. But the Second Inaugural did not mention the black soldiers or outline any ideas as to the future fate of the emancipated slave. In the preceding months, radical members of Congress had urged that the freedmen should be given the vote as part of the reconstruction of the rebel states. Lincoln had opposed this in public. Writing to the Governor of Louisiana at a time when that state was establishing franchise-qualifications, he gently observed: ‘I barely suggest for your private consideration, whether some of the colored people may not be let in – as for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks.’³⁸ In this attempt to cajole the Louisiana governor a moderate tone was no doubt advisable and the enfranchisement of black soldiers would already establish a considerable block of black voters. If Lincoln had lived it seems quite possible that, as the situation evolved, so too would his views on this matter. James Oakes has noted that Lincoln, in the last year of his life, went out of his way to seek out Frederick Douglass. Given the racism that permeated the North as much as the South, Lincoln’s willingness to solicit the views of the veteran black abolitionist and treat him as an equal was a significant development. When Douglass was stopped at the door of the reception held following the Second Inaugural, Lincoln went over publicly to greet him and make clear to all how welcome the black abolitionist leader was in the White House.³⁹

In the last year of the War, Lincoln gave up his long-held attachment to ‘colonisation’ – the policy of encouraging freed-people to leave the United States and find a new life in Africa. He found that colonisation was rejected by nearly every strand in the African-American community. In the years 1863–4

38. Vincent 1976, p. 22.

39. Oakes 2007.

he had far more contact with African-Americans than in previous years, meeting black church-leaders and abolitionists and also individual refugees. Elizabeth Kekley, a woman of colour who was his wife's seamstress and confidante, was a member of the Washington Contraband Relief Committee. Just as the 'contrabands' had obliged the Union authorities to take a stand on slavery, so exposure to black opinion on the matter helped to persuade Lincoln to give up colonisation. African-Americans had many reasons to reject 'colonisation'. A point they often made may have had a special appeal to Lincoln, namely the argument from 'unrequited labour'. After all, the slaves' toil had built the seat of government in Washington DC, and many fortunes in both the South and North.⁴⁰

Frederick Douglass later wrote: '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.'⁴¹ This verdict does not directly refer to race, but we may assume that it is also covered by the term 'sentiment'. Lincoln's attempts to reach out to Douglass in the last year of his life seem to signal the stirring of an awareness of the need for African-American agency if freedom was really to be won.

The assassination of Lincoln prompted the International to send another address to the new American president.⁴² This address closed with the observation that the way was now open to a 'new era of the emancipation of labour'. Marx and Engels were soon alarmed by the actions of Lincoln's successor. On 15 July 1865 Engels wrote to his friend, attacking Johnson:

His [Johnson's] hatred of Negroes comes out more and more violently... If things go on like this, in six months all the old villains of secession will be sitting in Congress at Washington. Without colored suffrage nothing whatever can be done there.⁴³

40. For Lincoln's long attachment to colonisation, see Foner 2008. Sinha 2008 documents the African-American contribution to changing Lincoln's mind on the question. Oakes 2008 argues that the 'unrequited labour' strand in Lincoln's rejection of slavery became more marked in the late 1850s and the War years.

41. Quoted in Fredrickson 2008, p. 126.

42. In this text Marx, who again wrote it, heaps praise on Lincoln as 'a man neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his great goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them, carried away by no surge of popular favour, disheartened by no slackening of the popular pulse; tempering stern acts by the gleam of a kind heart, illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humour, doing his titanic work as humbly and homely as heaven-born rulers do little things with the grandiloquence of pomp and state. Such, indeed, was the modesty of this great and good man that the world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr.' (Marx and Engels 1961, p. 358.)

43. Marx and Engels 1961, pp. 276–7.

The IWA General Council sent a protest to President Johnson in September 1865 and urged that the freedmen should not be denied the vote. In April 1866 Marx wrote to Engels: 'After the Civil War the United States are only now really entering the revolutionary phase.'⁴⁴

The two men expected more from the victory of the Union than an ending of slavery, momentous as that was. They also expected the producers to assert new political and social rights. If the freedmen moved simply from chattel-slavery to wage-slavery, if they were denied the right to vote, or organise, or receive education, then the term 'emancipation' would be a mockery. Some Union commanders were already settling freedmen on public or confiscated land. However, this prospect was compromised when the new man in the White House, making use of his presidential powers, pardoned first hundreds and then thousands of former rebel-leaders. Clearly, if they were pardoned there was no ground for seizing their land.

As it turned out, the era of Reconstruction did indeed bring a radical surge in both South and North, with the Republican Party seeking to keep abreast of events by adopting the ideas of radical abolitionists, black as well as white, and with pressure being exerted by a shifting coalition of labour-unions, social reformers, African-American conventions, feminists, and, last but not least, the multiplying American sections of the IWA. The knowledge that the martyred president had acknowledged its earlier address, and the warm, not to say fulsome, nature of Marx's tribute to the 'son of the working class' helped to make the International a quite respectable and visible body. The post-Civil War radicalisation in North America in some ways may be compared with the British experience of slave-emancipation and political reform in Britain in the 1830s. In both countries abolitionism and the 'free labour'-doctrine seemed at one moment to consecrate wage-labour and its central rôle in the capitalist order, only to give rise to popular movements – Chartism in Britain, a wave of class-struggles and popular radicalism in the US – which challenged the given form of the bourgeois order. While the banner of free labour expressed bourgeois hegemony at one moment, it furnished a means of mobilising against it at another. In one register the ideal of free labour encouraged the aspiration of workers to become independent small producers, with their own workshop or farm. Hence the Republican slogan 'free soil, free labor, free men' and its embodiment in the Homestead Act of 1862.⁴⁵ But in the United States of the 1860s and 1870s, as in the Britain of the 1840s, there were increasing numbers of wage-workers who did not want to become farmers and who looked to a collective improvement in the rights of working people.

44. Marx and Engels 1961, p. 277.

45. The classic study of the free-labour doctrine is Foner 1970.

David Montgomery takes a sample of over 70 labour-organisers of the later 1860s about whom information is available and finds that most of them were second-generation wage-workers, with about half of them being British immigrants. Their efforts focused, not on acquiring land, but on regulating the conditions of labour and securing political and industrial representation of the working man.⁴⁶ Of course some workers did take up the offer of land, but many realised that this could prove a trap. Already by the middle and late 1860s the farmers' Grange movement was complaining at exorbitant railroad-freight rates and cut-throat competition from large producers.

David Fernbach points out that the *Address to President Lincoln* was one of the first public acts of the International.⁴⁷ Lincoln's reply, published in *The Times* and elsewhere, was a publicity-coup. Moreover, the campaign to radicalise the resistance to Southern secession – to turn the Civil War into a social revolution – seems to have had a major impact on Marx's thinking and vocabulary. The addresses written by Marx for the International, including its *Inaugural Address*, make repeated use of the term 'emancipation', a word that Marx used in his early writings but which did not figure in the *Communist Manifesto*, or in his writings in the 1850s. Marx's return to the concept also involved a modification to its use by abolitionists. For most abolitionists, the concept of emancipation conjured up the idea of an emancipator, an external agent carrying out the process of liberation. Marx believed that the new working class would be the agent of its own liberation. He did sometimes take note of slave-resistance and slave-revolt, but he did not study the Haitian example and tended to believe that slaves needed external deliverance. Given that people of colour were a minority – albeit a large one – in the US South, this was very likely to be the case in North America. But the notion of emancipation also contains within it the idea that the person or social group to be emancipated is self-standing, capable of exercising freedom and has no need of an exploiter. Marx had always seen the modern industrial working class as the first exploited class which – because of the social and political rights it had, or would, conquer, and because it was schooled and organised by capitalism itself – could take its destiny into its own hands. The agent here was the 'collective worker', all those who contributed to social labour. Marx argues in the IWA's own *Inaugural Address* that 'the emancipation of the working class will be the task of the working class itself' – in a word, it will be self-emancipation. Marx saw the fostering of working-class organisation as the International's most crucial task, and he believed that class-struggle would

46. Montgomery 1967.

47. Fernbach 1974, p. 14.

set up a learning process which would lead them sooner-or-later to see the need for working-class political power.⁴⁸ Even this modification of the emancipation-concept may have had some small, unconscious echo of Lincoln at Gettysburg, as when Marx commends the Paris Commune for embodying ‘the people acting for itself, by itself’.⁴⁹

Raya Dunyevskaya argues that the US Civil War prompted Marx to deepen and elaborate his analysis of the length of the working day in *Das Kapital*, published in 1867.⁵⁰ The early labour-movement in the US, as in Britain, sought, and sometimes won, laws limiting the length of the working day. Some employers argued that this would be ruinous since they made all their profits in the last two hours. Marx was able to show that the more efficient employers would be able to thrive under such regulation. Struggles over this issue were to play a major rôle in US labour-organising in the postbellum world.⁵¹ In 1867 a National Labor Union was formed to spread the eight-hour-day demand. At its first national meeting, the NLU declared: ‘The National Labor Union knows no north, no south, no east, no west, neither color nor sex, on the question of the rights of labor.’⁵² In 1868 Congress was pressured to legislate an eight-hour-day for Federal employees.

Marx was far from admiring the US political system, which he regarded as continuing to exhibit extreme degrees of corruption, demagoguery and humbug. However, Marx and Engels devoted little attention to aspects of the Constitution and its functioning which rendered it so vulnerable to abuses. For example, they did not note the vagaries of the electoral college or the indirect election of senators. Nevertheless Lincoln’s conduct during the Civil War crisis illustrated important points, in Marx’s view. The challenge of a ‘slaveholders’ revolt’ justified resort to military means. Thus Karl Kautsky and other Marxists were wont to argue that any workers’ government elected within a bourgeois-democratic régime should expect there to be the capitalist equivalent of a ‘slaveholders’ revolt’ and should prepare to suppress it by any means necessary. The example of the Commune reminded Marx of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, a term that he did not use between 1852 and 1871. Like the Romans Marx saw dictatorship as different from tyranny, in that the dictator wielded extra-constitutional powers for a brief

48. As Carol Johnson points out, this leaves little room for long-term reformism. See Johnson 1980.

49. Draper 1986, p. 273.

50. Dunayevskaya 1971, pp. 81–91.

51. See Blackburn 2010, pp. 153–76.

52. Quoted in Messer-Kruse 1998, p. 191.

emergency-period. Lincoln was sometimes portrayed as a dictator in this sense, as Hal Draper points out.⁵³

The 1860s were, simultaneously, the years of Marx's most sustained political activity and the period where his theoretical reflections achieved their most mature form. The backdrop of the mighty conflict in North America seems to have helped him organise and publish some of his best work. His US readers were to comprise an extraordinary range, from German socialists to Yankee radicals, from labour-organisers to pioneer-feminists, from syndicalists to military men, Frederick Sorge and Col Weidermeyer, Lucy Parsons and Samuel Gompers, Victoria Woodhull and Eugene Debs, Richard Hinton and W.E.B. Dubois. Despite their very different conclusions, these readers found in Marx's writings, whether on the Paris Commune or on the capitalist system, something that allowed them to make sense of their country's 'unfinished revolution' – its strange mixture of victories and defeat, struggles for liberation and robber-baron capitalism. Radical Reconstruction led to historic gains in both South and North, but many of these were compromised or reversed in the 1870s after momentous class-struggles.⁵⁴ The present essay seeks only to draw attention to the creative, tantalising – and still-incomplete – nature of this extraordinary conjuncture.⁵⁵

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53. Draper 1986, p. 15.

54. See Foner 1988 and Hahn 2003, pp. 103–5.

55. See Blackburn 2010 and also Burbank 1978. For the rôle of African-Americans in the strike and later, see Jack 2007, especially pp. 142–50. See also Bruce 1959; Foner 1977; Green 2006.

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