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Marx, Lincoln and Project 1619



Branding Slaves, from William O. Blake's *The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade*.

It must have enraged the historians who signed Sean Wilentz's open letter to the New York Times and their World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) allies to see Abraham Lincoln knocked off his pedestal. How insolent for Nikole Hannah-Jones to write in her introductory essay for Project 1619 that "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity." Lincoln was not only an iconic figure for the average American. Karl Marx admired him as well for his war on slavery. Since the primary goal of the critics of Project 1619 was to prioritize class over "identity", naturally Karl Marx

was just the authority to help make their case against the bourgeois New York Times intent on dividing the working-class.

Since the WSWS sets itself up as a Marxist gate-keeper par excellence, we can assume that the historians also had the Karl Marx-Abraham Lincoln in mind when they hooked up with the Trotskyist sect. James McPherson is probably the closest to WSWS ideologically, having granted them interviews over the years. When they asked him if he read Karl Marx's writings on the Civil War, the historian replied, "Well, I think they have a lot of very good insight into what was going on in the American Civil War. Marx certainly saw the abolition of slavery as a kind of bourgeois revolution that paved the way for the proletarian revolution that he hoped would come in another generation or so. It was a crucial step on the way to the eventual proletarian revolution, as Marx perceived it."

In this article, I will look critically at what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote about these questions. Although I have been a Marxist for 52 years, I have little patience with those who put him (or Lenin and Trotsky) on a pedestal. I believe that Nikole Hannah-Jones had good reasons to question his sanctity. More to the point, I will argue that Marx and Engels lacked the political foresight to see how black Americans would be short-changed after the Civil War. Keeping in mind that the first socialist international was located in the United States, we must examine its relationship to the newly emancipated black population. Based on my reading of Timothy Messer-Kruse's "The Yankee International," my conclusion is that it fell short.

Messer-Kruse's 1998 book explores the split between the orthodox Marxist faction led by Friedrich Sorge and the decidedly non-orthodox faction led by Victoria Woodhull. While obscure perhaps to many CounterPunch readers, the two symbolize opposing poles on the American left. Sorge is a forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party that publishes WSWS. In the same way that they smeared the Black Lives Matter movement as embodying a "racialist perspective...mired in the dead-end of identity politics," so did Friedrich Sorge demonstrate a preference for organizing white Irish workers over newly emancipated blacks.

The first question that might occur is whether Sorge was acting on a misinterpretation of Marx's writings. To provide an answer, it is necessary to look at what Marx wrote in a well-known salute to the Republican president on behalf of the first socialist international

that would soon relocate to the United States. Written on January 28, 1865 and presented to the American ambassador in London, it begins, “We congratulate the American people upon your re-election by a large majority. If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery.”

The next to last paragraph is a bit more worrisome:

While the workingmen, the true political powers 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.

A careful reading might suggest that slavery held back the “white-skinned laborer” that Marx saw as the revolutionary subject. He certainly understood that slavery was evil, but Marx was no moralist. He was a historical materialist searching for the class forces that could lead to socialism and, as such, might have little identification with the religious motivations of a John Brown or William Lloyd Garrison.

Granted that Marx and Engels might have considered their correspondence to be a strictly private matter, it does shed light on their racial outlook when we read a letter Engels wrote to Marx on July 15, 1865. By this date, Andrew Johnson had succeeded Lincoln, who died three months earlier at the hands of John Wilkes Booth. Engels wrote, “Mr Johnson’s policy is less and less to my liking, too. Nigger-hatred is coming out more and more violently, and he is relinquishing all his power vis-à-vis the old lords in the South.” One possibility of defeating Johnson’s bid to restore the slavocracy to its former status was “coloured suffrage.” But a more likely outcome will be northerners coming south and buying land on the cheap. In such an event, what will happen to the emancipated blacks? Engels coolly appraises the situation: “The niggers will probably turn into small squatters as in Jamaica. Thus ultimately the oligarchy will go to pot after all, but the process could be accomplished immediately at one fell swoop, whereas it is now being drawn out.”

To give you an idea of how racism could infect the left, a presumably Communist Party editor of the collected Marx-Engels added this footnote: “‘Nigger’ did not have quite the pejorative meaning in 19th Century England that use of the word later acquired.” As if the “quite” might assuage the reader.

From the very beginning, there was both a cultural and political clash between the Americans and the foreign-born Marxists over how to build a socialist movement in the USA. For people like Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennessee Claflin, the movement rested upon prior struggles, especially the abolitionist movement. Friedrich Sorge, an old friend of Marx and Engels, had little experience in the U.S. He was undoubtedly a dedicated revolutionary who took up arms in the 1848 struggle against a feudal state in Germany. After living precariously in Europe for the next four years trying to avoid German executioners, he relocated to Hoboken, New Jersey where he became a music teacher. A year after Marx and Engels founded the first socialist international in 1864, called the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), Sorge began building "sections" in the U.S. They generally attracted European immigrants who often had experiences taking up arms against the monarchies.

Until 1871, the IWA had limited growth. All that changed after the Paris Commune. Despite its defeat, it became an inspiration to both foreign-born workers and the people Messer-Kruse dubbed as Yankees. He gives an example of how veteran abolitionists hailed the Commune:

Amidst the tidal swell of denunciation that roared from American presses, the formerly abolitionist journals stood apart in their uncompromising support for the Commune. The National Anti-Slavery Standard, for example, featured the Paris dispatches of W.J. Linton, a radical who had cut his teeth in the struggles of Chartism in Britain and who was one of the most outspoken defenders of the Commune in America. Linton's articles explained the Commune not as the anarchic government of a mad rabble bent on looting, but as the rebellion of republicans against dictatorship and aristocracy. Linton provided many a radical with debating points by carefully exposing the distortions and lies of the daily press. The Standard kept its readers abreast of the progress of the trials and sentencing of the Commune leaders. Taking a literary turn, it featured a sympathetic poem on its front page, entitled "A Woman's Execution, Paris, May, '71," which ended with the slogan, "Vive la Commune!"

However, the Yankees couched their enthusiasm in terms that failed to meet Friedrich Sorge's ideological litmus test. The radical movement in the U.S. was a product of various strands that did not qualify as "scientific socialism." First and foremost, there was a strong spiritualist component that Mark Lause examined in his 2016 "Free Spirits:

“Spiritualism, Republicanism, and Radicalism in the Civil War Era.” Lause, a veteran socialist, got it right when he wrote:

Unlike other “faiths,” spiritualism proposed to place religion within a rational understanding of the natural, material world. Then, too, faith that human affairs formed part of the natural world fostered an assumption that scientific inquiry into the human condition might produce new insights with far-reaching implications. Most fundamentally, a generation before Karl Marx’s socialism presented itself as a scientific approach to the human condition, spiritualism offered a strangely rational intellectual challenge to the fundamental hierarchies of civilization. The spiritualist embrace indicated their adoption of Benjamin Franklin as a spirit guide and the technological language of “the telegraph.”

This sort of thing gave Friedrich Sorge the heebie-jeebies. It also didn’t help that Victoria Woodhull, the leader of the Yankee faction, was a professional spiritualist who operated in much the same manner as those little shops in New York with their mediums that can con you out of your hard-earned money. One of the people Woodhull might have “healed” was none other than the 73-year old Cornelius Vanderbilt, the nation’s richest man. So smitten was he by Woodhull and her sister Tennessee that he advanced them the funds they needed to open the first woman-owned stock brokerage on Wall Street. The money they earned allowed them to start the Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly that not only defended the Paris Commune but the need for socialism—at least how they understood it. In addition, they were suffragists and advocates of “free love.” Way ahead of her time, Woodhull wrote:

To woman, by nature, belongs the right of sexual determination. When the instinct is aroused in her, then and then only should commerce follow. When woman rises from sexual slavery to sexual freedom, into the ownership and control of her sexual organs, and man is obliged to respect this freedom, then will this instinct become pure and holy; then will woman be raised from the iniquity and morbidness in which she now wallows for existence, and the intensity and glory of her creative functions be increased a hundred-fold...

This open sexuality was enough to push Sorge over the edge. After accumulating sufficient evidence that the Yankees were pseudo-socialists, as WSWS would put it, Sorge called for a meeting of the IWA in 1872 that would read them out of the movement. Marx wrote up invective-filled charges against Woodhull. He called her “a

banker's woman, free-lover, and general humbug." It annoyed Sorge to no end that she had the temerity to run for president that year as the candidate of the Equal Rights Party. Like the anarchists, he thought that running for office was a diversion not worth the workers' time. His complaint was included in Marx's diatribe: "[F]or the present the International cannot and should not be taken in tow by any American political party; for none of them represents the workers' aspirations; none of them has for its objective the economic emancipation of the workers...our sole objective ought to be, for the present, the organization and the solidarity of the working class in America."

It did not seem to matter to Sorge or Marx that Woodhull's running-mate was none other than Frederick Douglass. His willingness to join her had a lot to do with the respect that her section in N.Y. had earned. They were showing solidarity with the black liberation movement of the time on a consistent basis. Indeed, when the Yankee socialists called for a mass demonstration in New York City to commemorate the martyrs of the Paris Commune, the first rank in the parade went to a company of black soldiers known as the Skidmore Guard. The demonstration passed by a quarter-million spectators. The sight of armed black men in the vanguard was electrifying. Sorge's group complained that the demonstration was a distraction from working-class struggles, whose participants would lose a day's pay by participating. He called for a boycott.

Black militias were an essential fixture of northern urban politics in this period. When black men donned uniforms and marched in formation, they were making a statement not only about their full rights as citizens but their determination to back these rights by any means necessary. The black Eighty-Fifth Regiment in NYC was one of the more radical and internationalist militias in the city. They had marched alongside Irish New Yorkers in honor of Fenian heroes and gave their units names like the "[Crispus] Attucks Guards" and "Free Soil Guards." This regiment decided to name Tennessee Claflin, Victoria Woodhull's sister, their commander, and supplied her with a uniform.

Sorge looked elsewhere for allies. He tried to recruit the Irish immigrants that Marx and Engels considered key to the building of a revolutionary workers movement. This was easier said than done. In a letter to Marx in August of 1871, Sorge wrote, "We have made great efforts for inducing the Irish Workingmen of this country to join the I.W.A., but religious and political prejudices and above all — their leaders have to this day withstood all our efforts. . . . Still we do not give it up & hope yet to gain a firm foothold amongst the Irish."

As it happens, the Irish were strong supporters of the Democratic Party. Wooing them would be almost impossible if Sorge's faction was equally disposed to the black workers who understandably voted Republican. In Noel Ignatiev's "How the Irish Became White," he refers to the loyalty the Irish had to the slavery-supporting party:

The fact of Irish attachment to the Democratic Party has been well established. By 1844, the Irish were the most solid voting bloc in the country, except for the free Negroes (who cast their ballots in the opposite direction from the Irish), and it was widely believed that Irish votes provided Polk's margin of victory in that years. The special relationship between the Irish and the Democratic Party was not an automatic attachment, nor a simple legacy of the "civil revolution" of 1800, but a bond renewed in the Jacksonian upsurge, and continuously thereafter.

In essence, Sorge was chasing after a working-class that was revolutionary in the abstract but reactionary in the concrete. It was hardly surprising that given this orientation, the IWA he captured with Marx's aid rapidly fell apart.

As for the Yankee socialists, they found other causes to embrace. Some of their leaders became devoted to the Knights of Labor, a profoundly egalitarian union movement consistent with their abolitionist past. In this case, they were committed to ending wage slavery in the same way they fought to abolish chattel slavery.

One of the few native-born workers who joined Friedrich Sorge's rump IWA was a cigarmaker named Samuel Gompers. He would have nothing to do with the Yankees, who he regarded as "dominated by a brilliant group of faddists, reformers, and sensation-loving spirits." Attending a reading group of Marxist literature, Gompers found its rigor invigorating. It was about as far from the Yankee radicals' obsession with egalitarianism as he could have imagined.

As he moved upwards in the ranks of the cigarmakers union, Gompers found himself at odds with the growing participation of females in the trade, many of whom lived in the poorer working-class neighborhoods of the Lower East Side. His right-hand man in the union, a German-American named Adolph Strasser, who also was an IWA member, referred to them as "tenement house scum." Whenever their paths crossed with the Knights of Labor, they saw them as an obstacle to the kind of union they wanted to build.

Gompers went on to found the American Federation of Labor, a craft union built on the principle of "pure and simple unionism," as Gompers put it. Between 1952 and 1955,

George Meany served as its president. After it merged with the CIO, Meany continued as the top officer. During the Vietnam War, Meany became notorious for his insistence that the AFL-CIO give its full support to LBJ's genocidal colonial war. Meany was also hostile to any affirmative action that would have allowed blacks to get skilled jobs rather than forced into sweeping floors or mopping restrooms. He said it was "nuts...to say that we've got to sacrifice our kids and our rights to take care of people who merely say that we've got to be employed because our skin is black."

Is it any wonder that Nikole Hannah-Jones's concluded that "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity?" Obviously, the reference to DNA is metaphorical, but there certainly is a continuity between Sorge, Gompers and Meany. If not to speak of the Socialist Equality Party. Whether or not this is Marx's fault or not might be a topic for further discussion.

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