

“Out of the death of slavery”: A Return to Marx’s Civil War Writings

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to offer a return to Marx, specifically to Marx’s writings on the US Civil War, in order to consider their role in the development of a Marxian materialist conception of history. To that end, this reading of Marx’s writings on the Civil War elicits a definition of class as 1) an objective, dynamic systemic process of exploitation in global capitalism, 2) defined concretely in a given space and time by the content, shape and limits, and necessities of political-economic struggle, and 3) a contested, fluid ideological and cultural structure rooted in (and without) social institutions contrive to reproduce existing social relations of production. In order to establish this multidimensional definition, I contextualize this reading of Marx’s Civil War writings within his extensive investigations of events in Asia and Africa.

Keywords: Marx, Marxism, US Civil War, class, racism

But out of the death of slavery a new life at once rose. (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 284)

Introduction: A Return to Marx

The goal of this essay is to offer a return to Marx, in the spirit of Aijaz Ahmed’s considerations of some more famous returns to Marx,¹ specifically to Marx’s writings on the US Civil War. The goal is to consider their role in the development of a Marxian materialist conception of history. To that end, the reading of Marx’s writings on the Civil War presented in this article elicits a definition of class as 1) an objective, dynamic systemic process of exploitation in global capitalism, 2) defined concretely in a given space and time by the content, shape and limits, and necessities of political-economic struggle, and 3) a contested, fluid ideological and cultural structure rooted in (and without) social institutions contrive to reproduce existing social relations of production. In order to establish this multidimensional definition, I contextualize this reading of Marx’s Civil War writings within his extensive investigations of global processes.

My reading of Marx’s Civil War work combined with a review of recent scholarship on his Asia and Africa writings offers two critical conclusions on the Marxist materialist conception of history: 1) that class struggles and anti-colonial struggles are dialectically inseparable, and 2) that the outcomes of such struggles shape new stages of political struggle and economic development rather than lead ineluctably to a new schematized mode of production or stage of civilization. In addition, I

critically examine how Marx's works open doors for understanding how non-class social systems (like white supremacy and settler colonialism, for example) operate semi-autonomously from this conceptualization of class, and how the failure to account for those systems leave the revolutionary project short, both in terms of the success of the democratic struggles and the class formations needed to move to a comprehensively democratic stage of political maturity and economic development.

A Review of the Literature: The Civil War Writings in Context

Perhaps for obvious reasons, US-based scholars in the 20th century generally have tended to elevate the importance of the Civil War writings. In so doing, they found as many versions of Marx in his Civil War writings as the different political orientations they held. For example, some have over-emphasized Marx's belief in the Northern workers' support for abolitionist causes; others discovered an endorsement of American "exceptionalism." Still others elucidated Marx's belief in the war as revolutionary and showed how his work foregrounds the issues of slavery, racism, and Black rebellion. Some even demonstrated his affinity for "popular front" politics, and, at least one sectarian American historian found evidence for how the venerable revolutionary slid into retrograde liberalism (Anderson 81-83).

As the 150th anniversary of the Civil War passed just a decade or so ago, radical scholars closely associated with the US have added new commentary about Marx's role in shaping how we view that conflict and its influence on his theory and political strategy. Sociologist Kevin B. Anderson positions that journalism (along with Marx's contemporaneous correspondence) in a decisive place in Marx's intellectual development and the production of Marxism as a body of political strategy, economic analysis, and revolutionary ethics. He highlights Marx's "radical abolitionism" and his "appreciation of African Americans as revolutionary subjects" (83-84). Historian Andrew Zimmerman shares this view, asserting, "The Civil War gave Marx and Engels new hope and models for revolutionary social change and thus contributed to the development of their 1848 revolutionary radicalism into the recognizable Marxism presented in *Capital* and practiced in the First International." Further, he argues, "[Marx and Engels]... understood that the revolution of African Americans against their own enslavement lay at the heart of the Civil War."² Nevertheless, he also sees limits to Marx's view of this revolutionary subjectivity that Anderson appears to have overlooked. For example, Zimmerman argues that Marx and Engels "missed" the fact that Black workers struck from the slave system in large numbers. Further, no comment from the theorists seems to recognize that Black people pressured for and won a decisive military role in the war; instead, their emphasis mainly centers on the actions of white politicians and military leaders. For Zimmerman, the evidence suggests that Marx and Engels were, at this stage of their political development, less inclined to recognize the full capacity of Black people to change the course of human events ("Introduction" xvi, xix, xxi).³

Despite this limitation, Zimmerman argues, even a partial acknowledgment of Black revolutionary subjectivity and its alignment with what Du Bois called "abolition democracy" places Marx's thought about this conflict in a complex relation to the idea that the wage laborer is the sole revolutionary working-class subject (Zimmerman xxvii).⁴ It was a political advance from the *Communist Manifesto*, and it reshaped how Marx thought and wrote about class in *Capital*.⁵ The British historian of American slavery Robin Blackburn shows that Marx regarded slavery as the war's central conflict, which as events progressed arranged multiple class and non-class actors (and geographical entities) into key social locations to affect the outcome and ultimate development of capitalism, its situatedness within the global system of capitalism and imperialism, and its own subsequent internal social antagonisms (Blackburn 13).

Marx's concerns in these writings are central to his richer development of a materialist conception of history, reasons political scientist August H. Nimtz. This conception involved recognition and politicization of the "conjuncture of struggles," or the relationship through alliances based in shared intra-class and cross-class interests, as well as connected political-economic determinations across space and time. For example, social forces and class formations such as the groups that would make up the First International Workingmen's Association in America aligned with the Republican Party to endorse Abraham Lincoln's candidacy for president in 1860 because of the shared anti-slavery goal. While Lincoln would not envision a path from that anti-slavery goal to a socialist revolution and remained a liberal, the internationalists favored such an alliance so as to promote the broadest unity against secession, the slaveholder's regime, and "the strongest anti-slavery position" possible in the Republican Party's platform (Nimtz 174). Such a move, for Marx, placed the most revolutionary elements of the socialist cause in an alliance not just with a section of the US capitalist class but also with a variety of local, national, and international forces: from English textile workers to enslaved people across the Global South, or enslaved people planning the next revolt in Missouri, to white farmers and workers in the US South and "border states" who failed to recognize their interest in abolishing slavery.

Nimtz, along with Blackburn, favors a view of Marx's theoretical developments of political strategy within the frame of class struggle as stadial.⁶ In this view, Marx views slavery as not only an abhorrent and oppressive social system but also a barrier to the general progress of human liberation. "The fight against slavery..." Nimtz writes, "was part-and-parcel of the democratic revolution and a necessary step in labor's struggle against capital" (174). Blackburn adds, "[d]efeating the slave power and freeing the slaves would not destroy capitalism, but it would create conditions far more favorable to organizing and elevating labor, whether white or black" (13). Zimmerman concurs with this assessment by arguing that their analysis of the Civil War reveals to Marx and Engels that their earlier "model for revolution" based on mechanical notions of social classes and phases of civilizational development needed

re-working. They come to realize that political movements would have to be defined in historically and geographically specific ways, “devising their own strategies and determining their own nature.” This perspective adds new recognition of the contingency of revolutionary action and the subjectivity of struggle within objective conditions (Zimmerman, “Introduction” xv).⁷

While this recent scholarship postulates valuable insights into the development of Marx’s thought and Marxist thought, it does little in the way of contextualizing Marx’s Civil War work. Instead, in reading his Civil War writing and presenting findings on it, scholars tend to extract it from a larger ongoing project in which Marx scrutinizes political-economic processes shaping the entire world, the whole capitalist and imperialist system, even as he tried to understand specific details of localized US events. Thus, historically and geographically specific events hold consequences and ramifications for global processes and dynamics; conversely, events in one part of the world may catalyze crisis or political transformation in another (Pradella 454-467). Understanding these processes and how they align collective revolutionary actors such as classes, class fractions, or anti-colonial movements within the framework of class struggle and socialist transformation, thus becomes a central feature of Marxist revolutionary theory. This internationalist framework drove his intellectual projects and is foundational to the Marxist project of revolutionary change. Accordingly, his writings on Asia and Africa, written at the same time, provide an essential frame for understanding his work on the Civil War.

How does Marx arrive at thinking so concretely about “the world of commerce as one nation and [that] presupposes the full worldwide imposition of the capitalist mode of production” (Pradella 461)? It was his study of a more comprehensive set of events and developments in the US, India, China, the British Isles, Central Asia, and Northern Africa beginning in the 1850s in which Marx’s thought must be considered. Indeed, it is worth restating here that Marx’s investigations of India and China were published as part of his journalism for a sizeable US readership in the *New York Daily-Tribune* in the years leading up to the Civil War. As the late Indian historian Bipan Chandra, the Chinese scholar Lin Chun, and Germany-based scholars Stefan Kalmring and Andreas Nowak have separately argued, this period of Marx’s intellectual development reveals a transition in how he viewed the relations of capitalism in Europe to the non-capitalist and colonized world. In the early 1850s, Marx would speak of the progressive role of capitalism (accompanied by “barbarism” that “goes naked” [Marx, “Future Results” 221]) in transforming colonized regions into an image of itself. Marx had long recognized that global capitalist development, with its core in England and northwestern Europe, had been made possible through the “the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins” (Marx, *Capital* 731).

While this three-part prelude to capitalism's world domination tells some critical portions of the story of capitalism's cost and innate brutality, it seems to concede the dominant narrative about the disappearance of American indigenous peoples. Marx's intellectual efforts would ultimately try to reckon with the struggles and potential independence of the latter two world's peoples listed in this narrative. Until, however, the last couple of years of his life and in the privacy of his personal notebooks, he would have little to say about the persistence or struggles for political, economic, or cultural sovereignty of American Indigenous peoples.⁸ In addition, in his observations on political changes in the Civil War period, Marx listed the Homestead Act of 1861, which redistributed lands acquired through colonial force and violence from Native peoples to white settlers, as one of several progressive moves that revolutionized the aims of the war against slavery (*MECWUS* 123). If this perspective does not concede moral legitimacy of the role of settler colonialism in the development of capitalism, it does some to regard Native peoples' struggles for their sovereign non-capitalist futures as terminated and fully incorporated into modern capitalist development.

It remains significant, however, that Marx would transform his once progressive model of capitalist development into a colonialist model wherein capitalism functioned to hinder the economic development of the colonized territories. This transition in his thought required a materialist conception of history based on the necessity of independent nationalist movements to sever relations with the colonizer as a necessary precursor to the broader framework of class struggle on an international scale (Chandra 70; Lin 699; Kalmring and Nowak 334-335). This transition enabled Marx to regard "national liberation and class struggles as mutually indispensable" (Lin 700). The anti-colonial struggle now stood in his thought as a direct threat to capitalism's existence and required strategic alliances among the worker's struggle, abolition democracy and slave rebellions, and international freedom movements as the counter-hegemonic conjuncture of forces to the central capitalist classes. This model, however, simply did not include American Native peoples.⁹

Class in the Materialist Conception of History

Before the Civil War writings, Marx regarded class in general as a dynamic relationship of groups formed by the economic and political processes within a social formation. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels, for instance, use terms like "social rank," "orders" and "gradations" to name social classes before capitalism, which were proscribed by non-economic factors such as "divine right" or kinship (14). In capitalism's development, however, class in general as a dynamic relationship of groups formed and shaped primarily in relationship to ownership (bourgeoisie) of means of production and who employ laborers (proletariat) forced to sell themselves. Other classes exist but tend to disappear or are transitional, clearing the way for a final confrontation between the two primary classes, producing a "classical form" of revolution.¹⁰ For example, bourgeois individuals form a class, Marx and Engels

note in *The German Ideology*, only “insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class” (82). Once this relationship exists and antagonistic interests form, “[t]he class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class” (82).

After the collapse of the revolutions in Europe, class in Marxist theory develops a new, historically specific turn. Objective conditions of a productive and economic nature are inflected by subjectivity and political struggles. This dynamic and contingent class formation is subject to intraclass competition, changing interests, conflict, and political struggles. Relationships of groups also create distinct class cultures that are dialectically related to economic dynamics but do not ensure a revolutionary character of that class automatically. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx argues that when conditions shape and “separates” one group’s “mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class” (187). Here, Marx defines class as a dynamic process of group formation linked to economic relations and consciousness of the antagonisms in those relations. Marx and Engels emphasize essential group formation and consciousness linked to economic realities over the dynamism and processes inherent in the formulations of these earlier class models.

These early models of social class accompanied, as Lin shows, a model of modes of production that in Marx’s Hegelian-influenced mind closely related socio-economic forms to “evolutionary sequences” and historically periodized civilizational forms ethnocentrically imposed as universal concepts. The development of Marx’s concept of the Asiatic mode of production, for instance, reinforced this “schematized sequence of modes of production,” which centered European capitalist development and inaccurately depicted Asian socio-economic systems as homogeneous and stagnant. At the same time, she argues, it created an opening for Marxists subsequently to observe distinctions between non-capitalist and pre-capitalist systems that disrupt the “schematized sequence” and to think through other models of contingent and non-deterministic models of development or historical change (Lin 699-720).

As Lin and Chandra separately note, Marx offers, in an 1853 article on India, a profound insight about the relation of class struggle to anti-colonial struggle, about capitalist development in relation to colonial rule. For the *New York Daily-Tribune*, and in the context of studying extensively anti-colonial rebellions in China, Marx rejected the positive colonial process of his earlier thought, writing instead, “the [English] bourgeoisie will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social conditions of the masses of people” under colonial rule (qtd. in Lin 702). Indeed, in this article, he expressed a form of international class relations and struggle that would find echoes in his discussions of class relations during the US Civil War.

A proletarian revolution would have to occur in Great Britain, or "the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether" (qtd. in Lin 702). Chandra argues that Marx is suggesting that capitalist development (and, thus, a class struggle that leads to socialist transformation) could occur in India only when Indians themselves discard colonial rule (45). Such new articulations of the agency of colonized peoples and their potential for rendering a revolutionary social change in both India and Europe possible and necessary "amounted to a milestone in [Marx's] intellectual trajectory" (Lin 703).

This relation of class forces and struggles, linked by capitalist relations through trade (from the illegal slave trade in Western Africa and the Caribbean to raw cotton production in the US South, opium harvested in India and dumped in Chinese markets) and political forms of control, is strikingly similar to the dynamic of class antagonisms to which Marx referred to, in at least two Civil War articles, as the "economical law." Quoting a Southern slave-owner, Marx writes, "either the slaves must be permitted to flee from the whites, or the whites must flee from the slaves" (*MECWUS* 33).¹¹ This "economical law" posits revolutionary agency in the specter of slave rebellion and the unplanned mobility of human capital freeing itself. Having studied the ongoing Chinese Taiping rebellion and the 1857-1859 mutiny in India, Marx predicts that without the ability to expand its territory through imperialist acquisitions, the hegemony of the Southern slaveocracy would be threatened by slave rebellions, escapes by the enslaved, and a crisis of its hegemonic leadership over Southern non-slave-holding whites who supported the slave system because of the promise of land and the potentiality of rising into the slaveholding class. Marx's prediction here also requires revolutionary action on the part of the various free progressive social forces and does not leave slavery to vanish or dissolve naturally, as many Northern liberals had naively hoped for more than two generations at the point the war began.

Because of the Southern slaveocracy's relation to the British financial and industrial bourgeoisie through its dominance as a raw cotton supplier and debtor, the US slave system played a pivotal role in capitalist accumulation for commodities moguls in Liverpool, textile manufacturers in Lancashire, and slave traders in Richmond, cotton magnates in Charleston, and shipping tycoons in New England ports.¹² A substantial trade in corn with the North, a shared repulsion to slavery and the slave trade, the intrigues of finance capital that linked northern US industrialists to British imperial interests in India and China, the eventual replacement of US cotton with South Asian cotton, and the opposition of significant portions of the British working class to intervention likely prevented serious endeavors to support the slaveocracy.¹³ Thus, the "economical law" as it applied to the US South's slave economy also threatened to demolish the smooth operations of global capitalism and imperialism.

Marx's formulation of the "economical law" not only centers class antagonism as the motor of social change, it positions the enslaved, in this particular context, as a critical agency within capitalist development and a materialist conception of history – by exposing and threatening limits to slaveholder capital and a revolutionary re-ordering of property relations. These US-specific realities also exist within and were determinations of a broader nexus of globalized capitalism through commodities trade. These relations place enslaved Blacks into a potential alliance with Indian and Chinese peasants and workers who struggle for freedom from British colonial rule and subjugation to their oppressive ruling classes, as well as with British industrial workers and (even) white Southern farmers and workers (Lin 699-720).

Marx watches this "economical law" unfold in the Civil War, shaping the direction of the war from a conservative "constitutional" cause to a "revolutionary" struggle for emancipation. In the spring of 1862, Marx and Engels co-write a two-part article for the Vienna *Die Presse* on military developments in the war in which they speak of the danger to the slaveholder territory from "its slave population" as well as its white Unionist elements (*MECWUS* 92). Later in the spring, they restate the "economical law" wherein class antagonisms between propertied, slaveholding whites and poor, property-less whites would emerge as Northern military victories and the dangers from slave escapes and rebellions accumulated. "There can be hardly any doubt, it is true, that the WHITE TRASH, as the planters themselves call the 'poor whites,' will attempt guerrilla warfare and brigandage. Such an attempt, however, will very quickly transform the propertied planters into Unionists" (*MECWUS* 113). Wealthy whites, Marx asserted, will insist on US military protection for their property against the white poor. Still, early on in the war and before major shifts from the constitutional and conciliatory agenda, Marx privately insists to Engels that in the existing social organization of the South a distinct advantage for the Confederacy lay in its ability to leave productive labor to enslaved people while non-productive property-less whites composed its military forces. By contrast, the mass of military personnel in the North were conscripted from Northeastern workers and Northwestern farmers who performed productive labor, suggesting a drain on the North's ability to continue production at the same levels. These differences in the division of labor, Marx argues, puts strong pressure on conservative war aims to metamorphize into more "revolutionary methods" (*MECWUS* 121).

As the summer of 1862 comes to a close, Marx sees the light at the end of the tunnel. He perceives a decline in the slaveholder's power, which, up to that time, retained a strong influence over Union policy by blocking the fullest emancipation goals, insisting on a procedure for returning fugitives to the South, and suppressing Black military support for the North. The slaveholder's power had produced limited war aims and recurring Northern failures on the battlefield. The mass of Northerners, he feels,¹⁴ wanted a strategic policy that weakened the unity of the slaveholders' cause, struck against its power in dominant political and military institutions,

and strategically undermined its ability to make war by drawing enslaved Blacks into rebellion in the South. In other words, the situation had begun to make a "revolutionary turn." Like the turn in the war itself, we can see in Marx's analysis a new recognition of the revolutionary role that Black people could and should have in transforming class relations, the military situation, and the relation of forces that might prompt a deeper revolutionary spirit among the working class as a whole. Marx notes the major political, legal, and ideological shifts toward abolitionist war aims that pre-date Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: the Homestead Bill, the abolition of slavery in Washington, elimination of slavery in new territories of the Union, a scheme for future abolition for Black people born after 1863, the emancipation of rebellious slaves who reached Union military lines, opening of a military role for emancipated Black people, and the international recognition of Haiti and Liberia.¹⁵ The slow pace of this shift in war aims to a revolutionary character created the possibility for demands for more rapid changes, greater democratic control of social and political institutions, and even "some sort of revolution ... in the North itself" (*MECWUS* 123).

Ideology and Hegemony

Marx's Civil War writings also create openings for theorizing ideological struggle and hegemony during a revolutionary crisis. Zimmerman argues that it is easy for modern people to look back on the Civil War and forget how truly revolutionary was the emancipation of humans counted as property, which totaled as much as three-fifths of the total GDP. The sanctity of property in the early 19th century was an ideological position held firmly across classes and geographical sections. This ideology had driven passage of fugitive slave laws, underpinned agrarian republicanism, and drove the distribution of expropriated Native lands to whites. Thus, white working-class people with aspirations for landownership and liberal elites who abhorred slavery but feared property expropriation more jointly resisted the fullest abolitionist political positions (Zimmerman, "From the Rhine" 140). For his part, as a revolutionary socialist, Marx holds no qualms about the liberation of the human property of a class of planters.

Marx is also aware of the role of white racism in disrupting political alliances across race and class formations that could have strengthened the revolutionary character of the US working class as a whole. During the 1862 midterm congressional elections, Marx and Engels communicated privately about white racism's role in those elections. For *Die Presse* in late November of 1862, after the Democrats made some gains against the Republican coalition using race-baiting as part of their electoral strategy, Marx writes, "[t]he Irishman sees the Negro as a dangerous competitor. The efficient farmers in Indiana and Ohio hate the Negro almost as much as the slaveholder" (*MECWUS* 142). This racism explains not only the electoral shift to the Democratic Party in 1862 but also, in part, helps to explain growing apathy about the war effort and increasing support for conciliatory gestures toward the

slaveholders.

Throughout his writings on the war, Marx references the hegemony of a class of a mere 300,000 slaveholders in the South, which had used its power and Constitutional measures to extend its dominance over the whole country. It used conservative institutions like the Senate, the Supreme Court, and the Electoral College to control the presidency, to shape property law, and to define the meaning of white supremacy in a manner that as Marx writes “usurped the Union” in order to force slavery as a legally protected institution across the land. This slaveocracy had sought to extend slave territory beyond the borders of the US through imperialist ventures. How does a minority of landowners and slaveholders extend this much influence in a society supposedly democratically organized? It had developed mechanisms and instrumentalities of hegemony that relied on the consent of the subaltern classes (a de facto inter-class alliance) to its authority to protect what became ideologically projected as shared racial and national interests. Southern poor and working-class whites, who formed the most substantial fraction of the voting population, had become convinced that their economic, political, and cultural interests aligned with those of the group of 300,000 slaveholders to such an extent that they consistently and solidly voted with them enough to maintain the hegemony of the slaveholding class in federal institutions of power.

The “economical law,” which he observes in the particular relations of the slaveholding South discussed above, served as the basis of one of two systems competing for dominance in the US. Free labor and agrarian republicanism served as the basis of the other. The year before Lincoln’s election, Marx had published *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In the preface to *A Contribution*, Marx crafted his famous abstract model of base and superstructure, relating the ideological, cultural, and political to the foundational economic relations and processes of a social formation. He wrote, “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.” This concept of relations “independent” of human will recalls to mind his language about the economic, political, and cultural levels of the category of class. He adds: “The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite *forms of social consciousness*.” He adds,

In studying such transformations, it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. (Marx, *A Contribution*)

This model identifies the formation of classes, the relations of class in an economic totality, and, thus, relations of social consciousness, mirroring classical type of revolutionary model in his earlier works with Engels. Marx's understanding of events that were taking place during the Civil War helped to re-shape this model.

The "economical law," which hinted at (but left underdeveloped) Black revolutionary subjectivity and rebellion proved to come true. Likewise, Northern whites tended to share this antagonism toward Southern slaveocracy and, along with hundreds of thousands of enslaved Black people, mobilized (with some crucial divisions prompted by white racism¹⁶) to fight the slaveocracy and to alter existing property relations radically. Southern white working-class consciousness of an economic antagonism with white slaveholders proved to be more elusive. Poor whites had become materially and emotionally dependent on their roles as slavecatchers and the psychological wage of racial superiority. They were firm believers in the racial justification, economic necessity, and cultural right to the territorial expansion that formed the cornerstones of white supremacy in the South and perhaps even on the entire globe (Horne 107; Du Bois 700-701). Indeed, the Reconstruction era, a period of definite social revolution in the US South, saw violent white resistance to changes in a class structure and political system that would have established a more democratic ground on which poor whites, based on alliance with their Black neighbors, could alter their economic relations with the plantation owners (Foner, *Reconstruction* xxiii; Goodwyn xxii). White plantation owners, despite their class antagonisms with poor whites, could almost universally count on their aid and assistance in the post-Reconstruction counter-revolution. Thus, with some notable exceptions in the populist movement, white working-class revolutionary consciousness that should have emerged from a recognition of class antagonism, following the model elucidated in the preface to *A Contribution*, failed to do so. The ideological and material strength of the system of white supremacy had been inadequately theorized in the critique of capitalism.¹⁷ American working-class radicals had failed to organize and mobilize against it in a sustained way.

Marx set aside the classical forms of revolutionary struggle sketched in the *Manifesto* by the end of his career. Instead, he would come to favor more complex systems conceived in stages of political, economic, and cultural development, especially within the totality of global capitalism and its multiple vectors of struggle and resistance. What shapes class, Marx argues in *Capital* Vol. III, is "always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers." This relationship produces antagonism at the point of production and in society in general, transforming individuals, by necessity, into something greater than themselves. This point, Marx calls the "innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure." Marx qualifies this generalization to say that other determinations also condition class and how people experience and deploy it. Marx argues further that class, "due to innumerable different empirical circumstances,

natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc.,” could show “infinite variations and gradations in appearance” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. III 791-792).

These relationships produce antagonisms at the point of production and in other vital points of civil society in general, creating a potential for transforming individuals, by necessity, into something greater than themselves. However, these relationships also produce forms of hegemony, consent to the rule of the powerful, and political alliances based in non-class political and cultural forms that prevent subaltern classes from seeing the “innermost secret.”¹⁸ Discovery of the hidden truth, the formation of classes, and subsequent political and economic development would depend on radical action, general advocacy of social equality, and socialist revolution. This next stage of struggle would be determined by the forms and content of struggle, the resulting direction of economic development of the social formation, and the continuing process of its ideological and political development of the class.

Conclusion: Class-as-identity is “non-actionable”

This reading of Marx’s Civil War writings offers two important theoretical outcomes. First, Marx’s attention to the class dynamics of the revolutionary dimensions of the war offers insights into a materialist conception of history that thinks stadially and through collective identities of class beyond the more abstract classical types referred to above by Engels. Second, Marx’s observations about the role of white racism, though thin theoretically, create an opening for more politically substantial thought about the inter-relations of racial systems (white supremacy) and its role apart from and within the “totality of relations of production” that condition the processes of class as material process of surplus-value production and appropriation, political hierarchy, and cultural and ideological difference (Chakrabarti and Dhar 104-105).

Fearful of accusations of “class reductionism,” many contemporary US academics, in their discussions of capitalism, swing the ideological pendulum fully into the relative intellectual and political safety of culturalist explanations. The thrust of this perspective is to portray the experiences of the poor and working-class people in strictly cultural terms: working-class or poverty cultures are constituted by deleterious experiences that happen unpredictably within otherwise fundamentally just social relations. Those cultures, then, determine cyclical patterns of social difficulties: poverty, deprived educational access, meager healthcare resources, low pay or structural unemployment, or difficult encounters with the legal system. Typically, such cultures are represented as isolated from capitalist production relations and separate from the logic and imperatives of capital accumulation. For example, in a recent widely publicized book on the working class and its supposed affinity for Trump, sociologist Jennifer M. Silva describes “the puzzle of working-class politics” where her definition slips between a combination of lower levels of education and income and more vaguely a culturalist explanation in the generation of shared values among a particular community (Silva 1, 12). Yes, significant structural changes in the economy are to blame for hardships, but no alternative is conceived other than a

more responsive political class to individualized or localized problems. Thus, culture defines the poor and working-class as little more than unfortunate demographic groups marred by their cynicism, apathy, and a luckless distance from the powerful.

A book titled *Class Matters*, written by a handful of *New York Times* journalists and other liberal and social democratic commentators a few years back, cultivates a similar definition of class. The book's editor wonders in the introduction if class remains an issue of status or education, or if it is even relevant. Such questions aim to give some meaning to the experiences of the Great Recession, the crisis of confidence in social institutions, and public doubts about the efficacy of capitalism itself. Even if class itself is no longer a meaningful category of social analysis, the book's editor admits that its social effects continue to shape personal destinies and, perhaps more importantly, the view of and relationship to the dominant social institutions and value systems. It is a concern for the integrity of the latter, expressed in fears about growing "cynicism" among the people that drove the publication of the book. Ideologically, the book positions classes into identitarian camps, driving a liberal or social democratic politics of reform to ease widespread cynicism, to placate the specter of an uprising, and to renew faith in the system as it is. Despite well-written, readable articles that handle a wide range of social problems, the more fundamental question about what class is and how to crack its intrinsic structure of inequality go unanswered (Keller ix-xviii).

Additional recent evidence suggests this identitarian trend has been institutionalized. For example, in polls used widely in the media, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks, categories identified as "social class" reflect this class-and-culture confusion. After the election of Donald Trump, a *New York Times* headline trumpeted, "Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites," but the article defined class solely as the lack of a college degree, which might, laughably, place billionaire college drop-outs Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg in the working class (Cohn). The inclination to define social class by education level emerges from mythology about white working-class people that uses the level-of-education measure to reduce class to a cultural phenomenon (Walley 231-232).¹⁹

Another way this class-as-identity is deployed is to explore the racist affiliations and sentiments of white working-class voters. With four hundred years of white supremacy, racial slavery, and racial apartheid behind it, the US capitalist system is constituted by and remains dependent on white racism against Black and many racialized and minoritized communities (and especially of the workers in those communities). Thus, explorations of the relationship of racism to articulations of racial and class formations stand as a worthy theoretical project and political necessity. However, without explaining class as a process interlocking with but also semi-autonomous from the racial formation, scholars slip into explanations or definitions of the white sections of the working class by its racialized and racist anger (Pied 33-50; Smith and Hanley 195-212).

The conceptualization of class-as-identity fails to resolve the definitional issues or to provide a basis for meaningful politics. As scholar John D. Marquez reasons, “[i]dentity is a static concept suggesting a fixed and homogenous social consciousness unable to maneuver through time, circumstance, and discursive schema” (Marquez 11). In other words, it yields an anthropological understanding of a group, in this instance of a poor or working-class demographic. By positioning class as a group with an identity, it strips that group and its individuals of agency and history, and confirms mythologies of social mobility, “the American Dream,” and need for the poor to make a break from the culture of poverty (primarily through education), and to join an imagined vast middle of a classless society. Culturalist versions of identity and as primary categories of social experience, Delia D. Aguilar demonstrates, work to move the discussion away from capitalism as a social system defined by processes of exploitation. Contemporary conversations about identities define them as positionings “divested of their structural material ground, resulting in purely discursive analysis.” Thus, class as identity turns out to be “non-actionable” except within a frame of top-down political reform that leaves unaddressed systemic of exploitation (Aguilar 211).

If Aijaz Ahmad is correct, and our most important communist philosophers have abandoned revolutionary concepts like class, then a revolutionary return to Marx is more necessary than ever. One corrective to the above theoretical inadequacy of contemporary theories of class in social democratic or liberal intellectual circles is that offered by American Studies scholars Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich and Marlon Lieber, who encourage avoiding “even to try to disentangle race and class relations.” They argue thinking about “the interaction of racism and class domination, to think racialization and proletarianization together.” This formula places these two determinations – race and class – into simultaneous roles under “the historical dynamic of capitalist accumulation” (Büscher-Ulbrich and Lieber 522). Aguilar concurs, writing, “the capitalist mode of production and the social relations underlying it,” which points fundamentally and most significantly to the antagonism between owners of property and sellers of labor power, is the social system in which “these identity markers [of gender, race, and others] are activated as mechanisms to facilitate exploitation” (211).

Marx’s project of placing the local and the national within the context of global processes of class formations and antagonisms alongside imperialist projects. As Vijay Prashad argues, “[o]ur political world is impoverished by the lack of the category of ‘imperialism’” (2536). The reading offered here of Marx’s study of the US Civil War aims to contextualize his work on these specific events within the broader development of capitalism, including the imperialist process of domination in non-capitalist formations. Thus, I read how Marx articulates two semi-autonomous processes: a revolutionary class struggle within one capitalist place alongside anti-colonialist struggles against colonial oppression in multiple geographical sites linked through trade and political relations. Marx initially erred when he imagined

that capitalism projects itself through imperialism in order to foster the identical forms of economic development in places outside its main centers of origin. His theory led to mistaken beliefs in capitalism's inherent progressiveness and the Eurocentric notion that non-capitalist forms of development in Asia, Africa, or the Americas were culturally or politically deficient. By thinking through this error and conceptualizing capitalism and colonialism as distinct systems, Marx empowers a perception of the revolutionary subjectivity of multiple forms of collective agency, both the working-class (and its fractions and alliances) and anti-colonial and national liberation movements (and their alliances). Each he regards as vital to the revolutionary transformation of global economic processes and people-centered forms of economic development.

The evidence suggests that while in his writings on a war launched to preserve racial slavery, Marx does not fully theorize the role of racism, specifically white supremacy, in capitalism and colonialism, he does forge openings for studies of the specificity of white racism in the US founded on white settler colonialism, racialized slavery, and racializing migration regimes. These three cornerstones of white racism operationalize capitalist accumulation, activate colonial forms of oppression, and cultivate white working-class consent to capitalist rule through racist and nationalist notions of identity that sublimate class antagonisms among whites.²⁰ While such an "array of oppressive or controlling conditions" serves the ends of capitalist accumulation, it is "irreducible to a 'modes of production narrative'" as Marquez argues (12). It calls for simultaneously thinking of regimes of exploitation for purposes of capitalist accumulation and regimes of oppression to underpin white supremacy and the accumulation of racial (and colonial) power. Thinking this way may also serve in what Prashad describes as a "popular front" strategy of linking "all struggles attempting to find breakthroughs of the working class towards greater and greater unity" (2543).

Notes:

1. Ahmed sketches how Derrida jettisons central Marxist categories such as class struggle, internationalism, party, and ideology in favor of "anti-politics" and anarchism. He further decries Zizek's "manic theatricality" in arriving at the same place as Derrida. Moreover, while he lauds Badiou's continued use of Marxist categories, he regrets his propensity for sectarianism and political purity over the exercise of complicated revolutionary power (Ahmed 50, 53).
2. Unlike Anderson who focuses solely on Marx, Zimmerman extends credit for this development in thought to Engels, and also to the transnational community of revolutionaries who settled in North America after the failed revolution of 1848 and continued to share their views of the American situation with Marx.
3. Other scholars attribute to both Marx and Engels a shared belief in "peoples [who] are devoid of all historical power of action." (see Kalmring and Nowak 334, 343).
4. Abolition democracy was W.E.B. Du Bois's term for the multiclass movement of abolitionists

who rejected white supremacy as well as slavery and called for social equality and the reorganization of US society on that basis (Du Bois 83).

5. Marx's most famous statements on racial slavery in the US and the divisive role of white racism were made during his discussion of the working day in *Capital* Vol. I, an important piece of the puzzle of class process of exploitation through surplus value extraction in industrial capitalism (284-285).

6. The adjective "stadial" is borrowed from economist David Laibman who uses it to characterize stages of development of political conjunctures and economic conditions differently from the traditional "stages of history" model often attributed to orthodox Marxism (Laibman 285).

7. Marx regarded the extension of Black political and economic rights in the postwar period as a critical component to the political development of the US working class as a whole (Marx and Engels, *Marx and Engels: The Civil War in the United States* 187 [hereafter cited as *MECWUS*]).

8. Marx's late study of Native societies seems to have been dependent primarily on framing Native societies as "pre-capitalist." Marx did begin to imagine a theory of multilinear human development that deviated from the modernist models of development initially elucidated in his earlier work and which served to define much of the Marxian tradition. Krader argues that Marx began to generally assert the agency of the "modern peasant commune" under capitalist and colonialist social formations (Krader, "Introduction" 17, 35).

9. My research on Civil War-era Native peoples in the state of Michigan reveals particular strategies of aligning with the abolitionist movement, with African American people, and conjoined struggles for sovereignty and a revolutionary transformation of American society (Wendland-Liu "Racial Formation").

10. It is this "classical form" to which Engels refers in a letter to Marx discussing his doubts about the revolutionary developments in the US in 1862 after the Democrats seem poised to make gains in the midterm elections, and Engels detects a growing apathy toward the war in the North (*MECWUS* 136). Classical formations that seemed emergent early in the war shifted and dissolved due in no small part to high levels of white racism among Northern workers and poor military leadership of the war aimed at conciliation with slaveholders rather than total victory.

11. Marx repeats his reference to this law as a signifier of the inherent contradiction of a slave system under capitalist conditions that are denied the ability to expand (*MECWUS* 47).

12. As 1861 came to a close, Marx characterizes British financial capital with interests in cotton commodities as "the cotton friends of secession in Liverpool" (Marx, *The Civil War in the United States* 46 [hereafter cited as *CWUS*]). Marx notes, London had recognized the Confederacy as a legitimate belligerent, and many finance capitalists and their friends in the British media pushed for full recognition of it as legitimate government (*CWUS* 49) and military intervention (*CWUS* 52; see also, Horne 33-34).

13. See Marx's comments in various articles in this time period (*CWUS* 52-53; 56; 85-86; 114-117; 119-122). Marx observes a split between British industrial capital and finance capital on how to understand and respond to the Civil War. Finance capitalists favored intervention in order to manipulate the price of cotton. Meanwhile, Marx reports, textile industrialists in early 1862

expressed opposition to intervention and explained that they held enough cotton in reserve to last for another 12 months. They had ordered lay-offs, wage cuts, and production slow-downs as a response to a two-year period of overproduction that had driven down their rate of profit. In other words, the two sections of capital had divergent interests in terms of policy that derived from a profit-taking imperative related to their distinct positions in the same commodity and trade relations (*CWUS*, 132).

14. At other times, Marx could not help but express pessimism about Northern white racism as a source of apathy toward the war effort (*MECWUS* 141-142).

15. The recognition of Haiti and Liberia, while apparently progressive in the recognition of Black and African self-rule, were also political gestures by the Lincoln administration to retain the fantasy of the forced deportation of African Americans and freed people with colonization schemes (Foner 239-240).

16. For example, see accounts of the role of racism in the Irish-American-led New York City draft riots of 1863 (Harris 279-288).

17. Marx's criticism of white racism and white supremacy has been much remarked upon, but I share Zimmerman's concern that a reliance on earlier classical types of revolutionary patterns reduced Marx's and Engels' interest in understanding more fully role of white supremacy in shaping class struggles, revolutionary transformation, and most importantly counter-revolutionary actions (Zimmerman, "Introduction" xvi-xvii).

18. Such a metaphor of the unseen suggests that working-class people fail to form classes antagonistic to the ruling class when they do not see the truth. In the context of the US, this conceptualization of class consciousness falls short in explaining the role of white racism. White racism allows whites to fully recognize the exploitation they experience, but at the same time believe their idealized white identity is a preferable form of property than the reality of sharing social spaces and political power with Black people and other racialized communities. In other words, whites consciously choose to sublimate class concern in order to preserve white supremacy.

19. Walley offers only rhetorical questions about what class may be, as if she is hesitant to offer a decisive, systemic definition of class processes and the complicated relationship of that process to groups of humans, about the confusion over what class is and how US social institutions mystify that category.

20. It may even cause many white workers, ever conscious of their exploitation, to favor class exploitation by white rulers over sharing the same social spaces or status with non-white people.

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