

The Specter Haunting Marxism

Marx and Engels are still revered in certain circles, as is the system of thought they invented in the 19th century. Indeed, on the Left, they are treated with the reverence that used to be reserved in the U.S. for the likes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt. But there is a specter haunting the hagiographies of these two icons of the Left. And it is the same one haunting the hagiographies of those once-deemed-great icons of the American mainstream – the specter of racism.

Now at first glance, that seems a bit much. Weren't Marx and Engels the champions of the oppressed? Didn't they call for a revolution to overthrow structural capitalism in all its nefarious guises? Didn't they extol the dignity of every human being in the face of state-sanctioned violence and oppression? Didn't they stand for liberation and equality and justice? And didn't they stand against an irredeemably evil bourgeoisie, the source of all that was wrong with the world, and call them out for their arrogance and ignorance?

Well, no. Quite apart from the monstrousness of the ideology they spawned, there is plenty of evidence that racist themes and tropes did suffuse the thinking of both Marx and Engels. To put it in theological terms, they were guilty of three sins. The first was a sin of omission. Marxism's foundational writings evince a profound indifference to, or perhaps ignorance of, race as an analytical category. The founding fathers of Marxism simply could not fit it into their formal theory of history, except perhaps to note that the world was more or less naturally divided into races, some of which were advanced and some retrograde. Nowhere in their revolutionary framework for understanding oppression, injustice, and inequality, is there any sense that race is an independent causal variable – or even a meaningful intervening one. Nowhere in their works does one find the category of race

deployed as a means of understanding exploitation or oppression, except as an epiphenomenon of class conflict. And nowhere is there even a hint that the category of race or the reality of race might be the product of power-laden social relations other than those associated with capitalism. To put it the other way around, nowhere in their work is there even a hint that race might be anything other than an epiphenomenon of capitalism – that is, that race might be a driver of human history in the same way as class. Simply put, you can search high and low, hither and yon, but you will not find race as a meaningful category of thought or action in the entire oeuvre of these two iconic thinkers. While race occasionally intersected with class in their writings, the latter's logic was always paramount, the logic of the former irrelevant to the point of near invisibility.

With one exception. The second sin of the founding fathers of Marxism was to assume that that the arc of history, bent exclusively by the dynamics of class conflict, began with the creation of inferior and superior races, necessarily involved conflict between the "barbaric" races and the civilized ones, and would inevitably end with the triumph of the superior races and the extinction of all the others.

So much for the original sin of omission; now on to the actual sins of commission. This brings us to sin #3: Marx and Engels were racists, plain and simple. This claim goes far beyond the intellectual faults and fantasies laid out above. This is a claim that these two icons of the Left – these revolutionaries admired so unquestioningly by so many – were, in fact, racists in the plain sense of the word: They hated and loathed the racialized, immutably inferior, Other. They systematically attributed to racialized groups certain innate or biological character traits, then placed those groups on a hierarchical scale, with some being naturally inferior and others superior. They believed that those "races" endowed with superior qualities were "bearers of progress," while those endowed with

inferior ones tended to hold humanity back. In their fundamental assumptions regarding the human condition, historical progress, and the communist utopia, they were racists through and through.

In this, both Marx and Engels reflected and perpetuated the scientific racism of their time. This racism used skin-color variations to divide humanity into a limited number of races, each endowed with specific and immutable characteristics and ranked hierarchically, with white on top and black at the bottom. The "inferior" races – the Indian, the "Bushman or Australian Negro," the Slav, etc. – were regarded either as degenerations from a single common race of humans (the monogenic view) or as independently evolving distinct skin-color races (the polygenic view). Whatever the sources of this racial differentiation, it was understood to be an immutable characteristic of the human race. Marx and Engels drank deeply at this racist trough.

Based on the historical evidence we have, this claim is simply incontrovertible. To be sure, the evidence of racism in the writings of Marx and Engels is scattered and haphazard. It is to be found in their private correspondence, works that went unpublished during their lifetimes, such as *The German Ideology*, and major published works such as Marx's *Capital* and Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. But, whatever the genre and however scattered the references, there is a consistency to their treatment of race. And it is this consistency that allows us to reconstruct their half-articulated "theory" of race and lay bare the racist assumptions built into both their scholarly theories and their personal beliefs.

Let us begin with their views on the innate character of the races. First, Marx and Engels viewed the white race as the most evolved and its societies as the most advanced. Disturbingly, but undeniably, there is more than a hint of Aryanism their talk about relations of production and class

struggle. By Aryanism, of course, I do not mean the 4th-century Christian heresy launched by the Alexandrian priest Arius. Rather, I am referring to the ideas of the 19th-century scholar A.J. de Gobineau as set forth in his manifesto, *The Inequality of the Races*. In this work, which was hugely popular and which set the stage for a 19th-century regrounding of racism in "science," Gobineau argued that all the most worthy ancient and modern civilizations were the creation of the white race, which was naturally at the apex of the world's racial pyramid, and was the driving force of human progress. It was Gobineau's writing that gave form to the already half-baked ideas of "Aryan superiority," then circulating in Europe – "Aryan genius," "Aryan creativity," and "Aryan blood" – that were ultimately to have such a murderous career both within and beyond their European birthplace. And it was Gobineau's ideas that, beneath a light mantle of historical materialist jargon, were to find their way into the collective thought-system of Marx and Engels. The white race was the vanguard of human development; the white working class, the agent of historical progress. All other races either had to submit to the redemptive ministrations of the white historical vanguard or be exterminated.

It is in this light that one must view Marx's and Engels' reference in *A Contribution to Critique of Political Economy* and elsewhere to "civilized" and "uncivilized" races. Similarly, it is impossible to make of Engels when he writes in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, that the Germans are a "highly gifted" branch of the Aryan race, or when he tries elsewhere to explain the Germans "superior development" as a race, without reference to the ambient Aryanism of his time and place.

But if they viewed whites as the superior race, and Germans as the most advanced branch of that race, they also viewed white Americans in a particularly positive light. This is perhaps best exemplified by the contrast they drew between the

“energetical [white] Yankees” who had just seized California from the “lazy [non-white] Mexicans, who didn’t know what to do with it.” The Americans, they asserted, could be expected to increase the population, build cities, and create a shipping and rail infrastructure, something the Mexicans, by virtue of their innate racial deficiencies, were utterly incapable of accomplishing. As Engels exulted at what he considered a revolutionary victory for historical progress:

It is in the interest of its own development that it [Mexico] shall, in the future, be placed under the tutelage of the United States. It is in the interest of the whole of America that the United States, thanks to the conquest of California, should achieve mastery over the Pacific Ocean.

Second, Marx and Engels routinely lumped various ethnic or national groups – Chinese, Mongols, Turks, Arabs, etc. – as part of one large, racialized, and decidedly non-white people, and then attributed to this racialized group a number of immutable characteristics. As Engels contemptuously enumerated them, these characteristics included “stupidity, learned ignorance, and pedantic barbarism.” Their societies – routinely labeled “Oriental despotisms” – they viewed as “undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative,” condemned to eternal backwardness and incapable of historical progress unless forcibly subjected to “Europeanization” or “Westernization,” which they equated with industrialization and which in turn would set them in the path to communism.

Third, while Marx and Engels supported abolition in the U.S., they did so in racialized terms. In a June 1853 letter to Engels, Marx declared that, while the continuing importation of African slaves meant that the Black population of Jamaica consisted mostly of “newly imported barbarians,” the “present negro generation in America [was] an indigenous product, more or less turned into Yankees, English speaking etc. and therefore... capable of emancipation.” Finally, in his article

entitled "Algeria," Engels praised the white Kabyles as "an industrious race" while characterizing the non-white inhabitants in the following terms:

Out of all the inhabitants, it is most likely the Moors who least deserve any respect. As city-dwellers, they are more inclined to luxury than the Arabs and Kabyles and, on account of the constant oppression of the Turkish governors, they are a timid race which has, notwithstanding, preserved their cruel and vindictive character while being of a very low moral level.

And this is just the tip of a very big iceberg. To be certain, Marx and Engels thought that races could evolve (or devolve) over centuries or millennia. And they certainly believed that European imperialist could "improve" the non-European races over such an extended span of time. They simply did not believe, however, that actually existing individuals concretely situated in time and space could ever escape their basic racial programming. In that sense, individual persons were basically bearers of race – and nothing more.

Significantly, this theory of innate racial characteristics included the kind of racialized physiognomy that we (mistakenly) tend to associate with Nazism rather than Marxism. Consider this fragment of a letter Marx sent to Engels regarding Ferdinand Lassalle, their great rival for the leadership of the German socialist movement:

It is now completely clear to me that he, as is proved by his cranial formation and his hair, descends from the Negroes who had joined Moses' exodus from Egypt, assuming that his mother or grandmother on the paternal side had not interbred with a n—. Now this union of Judaism and Germanism with a basic Negro substance must produce a peculiar product. The pushiness of the fellow is also n--like.

The founders of Marxism also had their own version of the Christian celestial hierarchy. Instead of the descending grades of God, angels, humans, and beasts, however, they ranked the races as civilized, capable of development, barbaric, and beast-like (each group slotted in according to both its state of development and its innate capacities). In the civilized category, Marx and Engels placed the white, Germanic races. Overall, Marx and Engels valued the European races more than non-Europeans. Indeed, they attributed the defeats of the Asian empires at the hands of the European a result of the superior "enterprise of the European race." The Russians they considered to be capable of development, and ahead of the minor Slavic races, but decidedly behind the Germans. As for the rest of the "Slavonic race," as Marx called it, they simply lacked what he called the "historical thrust force" that would allow them to master their own destiny rather than merely suffer what they must at the hands of superior races like the Germans and Magyars. The "Hindoos," Marx asserted, suffered from "natural languor," but were a "noble people" who, coming from the land where "our languages, our religions" originated, showed promise (again, echoes of Nazi race theory). At the bottom of the hierarchy, according to Marx and Engels, were the black-skinned peoples, whom they typically portrayed as standing a degree closer to animals than the rest of humanity. This redacted quote from Engels, offered as a criticism of political rival of mixed race, starkly reveals their thinking in this regard:

Being in his quality as a n— a degree nearer to the rest of the animal kingdom than the rest of us, he is undoubtedly the most appropriate representative of that district.

This quote also reveals Marx's view that the races could "interbreed," in this case with what he considered to be very bad results.

Finally, the founding fathers of Marxism embraced the

institution of racialized slavery in the United States. The views of Marx and Engels regarding primitive accumulation as an essential catalyst for capitalism (and thus communism) are well known. As are their views regarding slavery as a universal institution, necessarily part and parcel of all pre-capitalist modes of production. Simply put, they were utterly indifferent to the enslavement of millions of black Africans. Like capitalism, pre-capitalist modes of production based on slavery were simply way stations on the road to the communist utopia. And, as Marx himself declared, the traffic in black Africans "signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." For them, slavery was a "revolutionary" phenomenon. What is perhaps less well-known is their shared view that the enslavement of blacks in the U.S. was a necessary, if somewhat passé, ingredient in America's world-historical rise. Without slavery, they declared, there would be no United States; and without the United States and its huge white industrial working class, the prospects for a proletarian revolution were remote. Marx exhorted the European working to realize that "the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class." Slavery was part of the reason why, as Marx put it, the United States was "the most progressive country in the world."

Nor is the racism inherent in their analysis of the U.S. Civil War fully appreciated. These founding fathers were not in favor of Emancipation and the destruction of the pro-slavery CSA for the sake of the black slaves. In fact, they were as utterly indifferent to their plight as they were the plight of all the other enslaved peoples who happened not to be the exalted "wage-slaves" of the white European proletariat. Rather, they supported the war of the capitalist-industrial North against the agrarian-slave-economy South, because they feared what would happen to the white Northern proletariat – and the "workers of the world" more broadly – if the Confederacy prevailed.

The opportunistic assessment of the American Civil War by the founding fathers of Marxism, set against their indifference to race as an analytical concept, their endorsement of the racially-charged project of European imperialism (the pioneer of capitalism and therefore communism), their casual dismissal of vast swathes of racialized humanity as “backward” or immutably despotic, their indifference to the enslavement of millions of black Africans, and above all their unshakeable belief in the superiority of the white Germanic races, should leave no doubt in anyone’s mind: Marx and Engels were racists.

And their legacy, such as it is, ought therefore to be consigned either to the dustbin of history or the gnawing criticism of the mice, take your pick.

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from The Imaginative Conservative.

Image Credit:

Wikimedia Commons-Photogoddle, CC BY-SA 4.0