

The Civil War In The United States

Alex Gourevitch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Gourevitch, Alex (2017) "The Civil War In The United States," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.1.21

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss1/16>

Review

Gourevitch, Alex

Winter 2017

Marx, Karl; Engels, Friedrich and Zimmerman, Andrew. *The Civil War in the United States*. International Publishers, \$14.00 ISBN 9780717807536

Recovered Perspectives: Marx and Engels on the American Civil War

From the beginning of his research into political economy and working class history, Marx was fascinated by American politics. But by far his most intense period of engagement came in the 1850s and 60s, when he wrote for the American paper *New York Daily Tribune*, and then began covering the American Civil War for the European press. This was also the period when the two communists were in contact with many emigres from the failed European revolutions of 1848, including August Willich, an eventual Civil War hero, and Joseph Weydmeyer, publisher of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Marx and Engels wrote copious amounts about slavery and the Civil War in both private letters and public letters. They wrote about American affairs for European newspapers, like Vienna's *Die Presse*, about European responses to American affairs for the *Daily Tribune*, and their research also found its way into works of social theory, like Marx's *Capital*, as well as public addresses, such as those of the International Working Man's Association.

Andrew Zimmerman has done all of us the great favor of re-issuing these works in a new edition of *The Civil War in the United States: Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels*. The collection was first published in 1937 by Herbert M. Morais, under the pseudonym Richard Enmale. Morais was fired from Brooklyn College in 1941, a victim of a red-baiting inquiry into "subversive activities" in New York public education. Zimmerman's edition adds new selections from *Capital*, his own translations of some of Weydemeyer's writings, and concludes with a short summation by W.E.B. Dubois of Marx's approach to slavery and the Civil War. This new material, plus expert introductions to each section, give us a richer picture of Marx and Engels' work on the subject.

A few themes stand out. The first is that Marx and Engels were radical abolitionists. Roughly stated, Northern support for the Civil War divided along concern for the Union and desire to abolish slavery. Marx unequivocally cared about the latter. But he was also unsparing in his criticism of false friends. In private letters and columns for the *Daily Tribune*, Marx pillories the English press and middle-class abolitionists who, despite loudly proclaiming dislike of slavery, put most of their energy into arguing the war wasn't really about slavery. As Marx points out, not only had the South made clear the point of secession was to preserve slavery, but that the English bourgeoisie was doubly committed to slavery itself. "As long as the English cotton manufactures depended on slave-grown cotton," he wrote in one *Daily Tribune* column, "it could be truthfully asserted that they rested on a twofold slavery, the indirect slavery of the white man in England and the direct slavery of the black men on the other side of the Atlantic." As this, and many other passages attest, what concerned Marx above all was servitude in all its forms.

Marx wove his historical views about the slave-origins of industrial capitalism, and his political insights into the nominally abolitionist English liberals' not-so-secret sympathy for the South, into an argument about the world-historic significance of the Civil War. Over time, the Civil War established the principle that war for emancipation was a great and noble thing and, for that very reason, exposed class prejudices the world over. It also promised to eliminate racial boundaries among classes that had stood in the way of a proper class-conscious movement. As he says in one of the selections from *Capital*, "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

Another notable feature of this volume is that slavery and Civil War work their way deep into the development of Marx's social theory. Zimmerman includes classic passages from *Capital* in which we immediately see how saturated the theory is with servitude, human brutalization, and the distinction between different forms of bondage. In a passage from volume 3 of *Capital*, which Zimmerman doesn't include, Marx writes that "if there were no difference between essence and appearance there would be no need for science." Sometimes taken as a broad, disinterested theoretical claim, it is in fact best seen as a claim about the reason capitalist societies require a special kind of scientific analysis compared with others. As the passages that Zimmerman selects from *Capital* attest, Marx regularly compared wage-labor to slavery and serfdom because the latter were clear and transparent forms of enslavement. Nobody

disputed that they were forms of servitude, while wage-labor was taken to be free labor. One of the central aims of *Capital* is to show that abolition is not emancipation. After a passage in which he describes how the true character of wage-labor is only apparent once slavery is abolished, Marx writes, “The contract by which he sold to the capitalist his labor power proved, so to say, in black and white that he disposed of himself freely. The bargain concluded, it is discovered that he was no ‘free agent,’ that the time for which he is free to sell his labor is the time for which he is forced to sell it.” This subjection becomes only more intense once the wage-laborer is subject to the authority of the employer in the workplace, the site of Marx’s most lurid descriptions of bodies tortured and tormented by the imperatives of accumulation.

But all of this is concealed under the appearance given off by voluntary contracts and paid compensation. “In slave labor,” Marx writes, “all the slave’s labor appears as unpaid labor. In wage labor, on the contrary, even surplus labor, or unpaid labor, appears as paid.” Again, it is one of the great virtues of Zimmerman’s selections that these passages appear in his edition. They illuminate just how deeply Marx’s social theory drew from the issues of the day and, in turn, the degree to which slavery was a continuous touchstone for his thinking about capitalism.

For scholars of Marx, Engels, and Marxism there is a further benefit to this collection. Both Marx and Engels were excited by the Emancipation Proclamation, but frustrated that, by 1863, the war remained a kind of ‘constitutional’ war. From the very beginning, Marx had hoped that the North would abolish slavery, declare the slaves free, and arm them, thereby shattering the Southern economy and opening a second front. By the middle of the war, both understood abolition and expropriation of Southern property – not just in persons but also in land – as not just a necessary turn towards ‘revolutionary’ means, but as the one thing that could justify the war in the first place.

But Marx and Engels came apart in their evaluation of the likelihood the war would take anything like a revolutionary turn in the North’s favor. In a superbly edited fourth section of the collection, to which Zimmerman gives the title “McClellan or Fremont? Constitutional or Revolutionary War,” we are reminded that Marx and Engels should not be automatically lumped together, despite their close and continuous collaboration. Engels, the better and more experienced military strategist, poured over the military reports and maps of the South, only to fall into great doubts that the North would be able to win. As early as May 12,

1862, he was also worried that the North didn't have the stomach for the war: "Where, amongst the people, is there any sign of revolutionary vigor?" In a letter a month later, he again writes, "They shrink from conscription...from attacking slavery." Marx, in response, agreed that "wars of this kind ought to be conducted along revolutionary lines," but that the "Yankees have so far been trying to conduct it along constitutional ones."

But Marx, ever the more attentive to political conditions than just military ones, explained to Engels that "I don't quite share your views...I do not believe that all is up." The reason was that, "Northerners have been dominated by the representatives of the border slave states," but that the political dynamics of the war would force them into the background, in favor of the more abolitionist factions in Northwest and New England. In an article for *Die Presse*, published two days after his letter to Engels, he emphasized the point, "New England and the Northwest, which have provided the main body of the army, are determined to force on the government a revolutionary kind of warfare and to inscribe the battle-slogan of 'Abolition of Slavery!' on the star-spangled banner." He cites acts like the Homestead Bill, the admission of West Virginia, and the new law permitting the arming of emancipated slaves as evidence. This exchange reminds us that Marx was the more political thinker, at least with respect to the way war was not just a strategic but a socially transformative process driven by more than tactical considerations.

Other evidence of Marx's greater interest in the political than military dynamics of the war abound. A remarkable letter to Engels, dated July 5, 1861, contains an extensive analysis of Southern secession, in which he observes that nearly every state refused to put secession to a popular referendum because the slave oligarchy was afraid of resistance from the majority of poor whites. Given the common wisdom in our time that that popular sovereignty and referenda are the pivots on which racist societies, Marx's letter is a taut reminder that one of the most vicious attempts to protect the enslavement of a race had to employ the least democratic means available.

On the other end of the war, we find Marx and Engels, and their associate Weydemeyer, initially excited about Reconstruction as the truly revolutionary phase. Against the expectation one might have, they identify political conditions, specifically coercive guarantees of equal voting rights for Blacks, as the key to emancipation. The most interesting of these documents, translated by Zimmerman, is a 3 part series that Weydemeyer wrote for the German-language

St. Louis paper *Westliche Post*. Weydemeyer argues that, short of full political equality for blacks *and* redistribution of land from former slaveowners to free blacks, emancipation will have failed. “Despite years of occupation of southern territories, almost everywhere we have missed the opportunity to introduce free labor into southern life,” Weydemeyer writes. Weydemeyer’s point was that this was the only way to create the class basis for defending freedom for all. Freed blacks formed the only reliable group fully committed to Reconstruction, since the “southern landed aristocracy” was committed to restoration, the ‘poor [rural] whites’ too corrupted by their association with the old regime, leaving only the “much despised Negroes, who, along with the white craftsmen of the cities, represent practically the only workers in the South.” Notably, Weydemeyer put greater emphasis than Marx or Engels, on the dangers that poor whites posed to emancipation, perhaps because he was in the United States and had a better feel for the racial dynamics. This is but one more reminder of not just the intrinsic fascination but also the contemporary relevance of Zimmerman’s wonderfully edited volume. There is ten times more material worthy of discussion than I have been able to mention here.

Alexander Gourevitch is an assistant professor of Political Science at Brown University.