

LETTER

“SLAVERY CULTURE AND MARXISM”

Sujit Das in his ‘Slavery, Culture and Marxism’ [*Frontier*, Autumn Number 2010] goes to an extreme in castigating Marx, Lincoln et al as supporters or justifiers of slavery! Well, their ideas and responses may not exactly match the present ‘progressive’ trends regarding slavery but the two and a half centuries time elapsed since their living conditions has also to be taken into account. All said and done, Marx, and Lincoln also, were abolitionists to the core.

Marx was a leading European abolitionist. During the US Civil War Marx urged and organized English textile workers to support the blockade against the Confederacy, even though it was against their immediate economic interests and led to massive layoffs due to the cutoff of imported cotton. Marx took this position because, as he wrote to Engels on the eve of the Civil War, the uprisings of slaves in the US and of serfs in Russia were the "two most important events" taking place in the world. Writing about slavery just after the Civil War in Volume I of *Capital* (1867, 1961:301), Marx explained why he regarded the struggle against slavery as crucial to the future of the working class: "In the United States of North America every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

"Marx recognized that European and US capitalists promoted racist divisions within the working class in similar ways. The following passage comes from a letter that Marx (Marx and Engels, 1971) wrote from London in 1870 to two friends in New York:

"Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he regards himself as a member of the ruling nation and consequently he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the Negroes in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rulers in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this."

Marx concluded that it was "the most important object" of the International Working Men's Association "to make English workers realize that...the national emancipation of Ireland is...the first condition of their own social emancipation." Marx thus clearly defined racial and national divisions as the "secret" of capitalist power over the working class. He explicitly compared the division between English and Irish workers to that between white and black workers in the United States, and he concluded that the key task of the political leadership of the working class is to educate workers to recognize the crucial necessity of anti-racism.

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