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# Did Marx Defend Black Slavery? On Jamaica and Labour in a Black Skin

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## Abstract

Over the past 40 years a tradition of Marx interpretation has built up around a single passage concerning Black slavery in an 1853 letter from Marx to Engels, in order to demonstrate that Marx's support for emancipation was conditional on the level of 'civilisation' attained by Black slaves. I will argue that this interpretation, which attempts to prove Marx's racist defence of slavery, is overdetermined by an inattention to historical context and a hypersensitivity to Marx's nineteenth-century epithets. This is important because the alleged anti-Black racism of Marx and the place Black workers occupy in his historical-materialist vision of class struggle are of the utmost significance for properly conceptualising the relationship between Marxism and Black liberation.

## Keywords

Marx – race – slavery – black liberation – Jamaica – Morant Bay Rebellion – Haitian Revolution

The last several years have been especially good for Marx scholarship seeking to retrieve a more 'inclusive' Marx, who was concerned not only with European or 'white' labour but also colonial and non-white workers. One thinks especially of Kevin Anderson's *Marx at the Margins* and Andrew Zimmerman's new

edition of Marx and Engels's writings on the US Civil War.<sup>1</sup> There is still work to be done, however. Over the past forty years a tradition of Marx interpretation has built up around a single passage concerning Black slavery in an 1853 letter from Marx to Engels, in order to demonstrate that Marx's support for emancipation was conditional on the level of 'civilisation' attained by Black slaves.<sup>2</sup> The most recent incarnation of this interpretation is the scholar of communism Erik van Ree's piece 'Marx and Engels's Theory of History: Making Sense of the Race Factor', which, given its wide availability online, has even been picked up by the likes of the conservative IR magazine *The National Interest* to help make the case that 'Karl Marx Was a Total Racist'.<sup>3</sup> It has also been cited on the Left by the sociologist of racism Wulf D. Hund, who employs it to help make sense of Marx's relative silence on the Haitian revolution.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that this interpretation, which attempts to prove Marx's racist defence of slavery, is overdetermined by an inattention to historical context and a hypersensitivity to Marx's nineteenth-century epithets. Marxists should face these epithets head-on and never seek to whitewash history, but they also should not allow these epithets to cloud their judgement and impair their perception of Marx's actual political positions on the substantive issues. In the words of Kevin B. Anderson, we have to learn to recognise when Marx is 'using what today would be considered a very racist phrase to make an equally strong anti-racist point'.<sup>5</sup> Or, as August Nimtz has put it: Marx and Engels's 'comments in personal correspondence that were unambiguously racist, sexist or anti-Semitic must be seen in context and in relation to their entire corpus of writings and actions ... [We] should be cautious and not rush to judgement based on the vapid criteria of "political correctness."' <sup>6</sup>

In the course of demonstrating the falsity of this interpretation, we will be led into an exploration of Marx and Engels's comments on free Black workers, those of Jamaica in particular and of the Americas and the Caribbean in general. To my knowledge, this specific topic has virtually never been discussed

1 See Anderson 2016 and Marx and Engels 2016.

2 The first appearance in English of the passage in question seems to have been Avineri (ed.) 1968, p. 430.

3 See van Ree 2019 and Stepman 2020.

4 See Hund 2021. Hund's question of why Marx did not say more on the Haitian revolution is an interesting one. However, Hund's explanation – which partially rests on an appeal to the 'freshly imported barbarians' line discussed here – is put in doubt to the extent that the line fails to provide such support, as I show below.

5 Anderson 2016, p. 98.

6 Nimtz 2003, p. 132, n. 35.

in Marx scholarship.<sup>7</sup> We will thus also give the lie to some of the claims of J. Lorand Matory in his recent book, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*, where among other things he asserts that ‘Black “wage slaves” – i.e. free Black wage-labourers – is ‘a category Marx fails even to acknowledge’.<sup>8</sup>

What might to some seem a trivial exercise in Marxology has in fact profound symbolic importance. It is no coincidence that both Carlos Moore – the Black Marxist turned anti-communist Pan-Africanist – and Charles Mills – the late Black Marxist turned ‘Black radical liberal’ – each marked their departure from the Marxist tradition with an essay seeking to show that Marx and Engels were anti-Black racists. As Moore recounts in his recent memoir *Pichón*:

My definitive break with communism in all its forms took place at the end of the 1960s when I drafted an essay on the Marxist position on race, *Were Marx and Engels Racists?* It appeared in 1972 to general condemnation from the left. I was confirmed by many as an unrepentant stooge of American imperialism. However, severing my last tenuous links to world communism was an act of personal liberation.<sup>9</sup>

And for Mills, writing ‘in what was to be my last paper explicitly within the Marxist tradition,’<sup>10</sup>

Marx and Engels’ colorless, raceless workers are actually *white* ... we must ask whether their contemptuous attitude toward people of color does not raise the question of whether they ... should not be indicted for racism and the consignment of nonwhites, particularly blacks, to a different theoretical category.<sup>11</sup>

So, I would support that the subsumption of the experience of the colonized and the racially subordinated under orthodox Marxist historical materialist categories is doubly problematic. These raceless categories do not capture and register the specificities of the experience of people of color; and though they are now deployed race-neutrally, they were

7 Apart from a few sentences here and there. See Anderson 2016, p. 160; Nimitz 2003, p. 188, n. 6; Cohen 2001, p. 321, n. 3.

8 Matory 2018, p. 72.

9 Moore 2008, pp. 287–8. See also Moore 1972 and 1974.

10 Mills 2003, p. 122.

11 Mills 2003, p. 151.

arguably not intended by the founders to extend without qualification to this population in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

As Manning Marable put it in his explanation of ‘Why Black Americans Are Not Socialists’, ‘Part of the rationale for some black nationalists’ fears that Marxism is a form of “left-wing racism” must be attributed to the writings of Marx himself.’ Citing the 1853 passage I will examine in this paper, he notes that such ‘blatantly racist statements by the early proponents of socialism must give pause to many contemporary would-be black leftists.’<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the alleged anti-Black racism of Marx and the place Black workers occupy in his historical-materialist vision of class struggle are of the utmost significance for properly conceptualising the relationship between Marxism and Black liberation.

### ‘Freshly Imported Barbarians’

Let us begin by looking at the 1853 passage in question and the responses it has provoked. Marx is reporting to Engels his assessment of a new book published that year by the American economist Henry Carey, *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign: Why It Exists, and How It May Be Extinguished*. Marx first explains that ‘here “SLAVERY” covers all forms of servitude, WAGE-SLAVERY, etc.’ Marx had been critical of Carey in the past as a ‘harmoniser’, i.e., one aiming to show that the interests of capital and labour are in harmony rather than antagonistic as Marx believes. He explains to Engels in a mocking tone that Carey had formerly preached ‘free trade’ but had now arrived at ‘protectionism’ as the solution to all of America’s economic ills. Then comes the crucial passage (the original letter is in German; words written in English are capitalised; the italics are Marx’s):

The only thing of definite interest in the book is the comparison between Negro slavery as formerly practised by the English in Jamaica and elsewhere, and Negro slavery in the United States. He demonstrates how the main STOCK of Negroes in Jamaica always consisted of freshly imported BARBARIANS, since their treatment by the English meant not only that the Negro population was not maintained, but also that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the yearly imports always went to waste, whereas the present generation of Negroes

<sup>12</sup> Mills 2003, p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> Marable 1996, pp. 236–7, n. 2.

in America is a native product, more or less Yankeeified, English speaking, etc., and hence *capable of being emancipated*.<sup>14</sup>

What has the aforementioned tradition of interpretation made of this passage? Of its representatives, some are critical interpreters of Marx and Engels's views on race while others are generally sympathetic defenders of Marx and Marxism. They nonetheless all come to the same conclusion.

Diane Paul notes that 'Marx's and Engels' public writings on the American Civil War are certainly sympathetic to the cause of the "Negroes"', but then adds in a footnote alongside the offending passage: 'However, abolition for Marx presumably depended upon a certain level of civilization.'<sup>15</sup> Manning Marable says something similar:

Marx's famous and pithy quotation, 'labour with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labour with a black skin is branded,' characterizes the generally anti-racist and egalitarian orientation of his entire work. But there were also lapses.... In Marx's correspondence with Engels in June, 1853, he compares Jamaicans and Afro-American slaves, arguing that the former 'always consisted of newly imported barbarians,' whereas Black Americans were 'becoming a native product, more or less Yankeeified, English speaking, etc., and therefore fit for emancipation'.<sup>16</sup>

Andrew Zimmerman, whose whole editorial apparatus for his new edition of Marx and Engels's writings on the Civil War is geared to basically vindicating their views – 'Marx and Engels opposed racism at every turn,' he first declares – nonetheless then feels compelled to do an about-face and appease those who will balk at the language of the passage in question:

When Marx remarked, in 1853, that US blacks who were born into slavery were not 'freshly imported barbarians' from Africa but rather 'a native product, more or less Yankeeified, English speaking, etc., and hence capable of being emancipated,' he did not only denigrate African cultures; he also blinded himself to the many African and African American political traditions that contributed to the defeat of slavery in the Americas.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Marx 1983a, p. 346.

15 Paul 1981, p. 127.

16 Marable 1987, p. 32.

17 Andrew Zimmerman in Marx and Engels 2016, p. xxvi.

Finally, Erik van Ree essentially echoes Paul, whose article he relies on heavily for his whole orientation to the question of Marx and Engels on race:

Both men strongly supported abolitionism. Then again, the question of race remained an issue for them: whether the ‘negroes’ were capable of emancipation at all did represent a real question. In a 14 June 1853 letter to Engels, Marx indicated that, in the past, Jamaica had been importing new negro slaves all the time, making for a population mostly consisting of ‘newly imported barbarians’. On the contrary, the ‘present negro generation in America [represents] an indigenous product, more or less turned into Yankees, English speaking etc. and therefore becomes *capable of emancipation*’.<sup>18</sup>

What all of these interpretations seem to agree on is that Marx thinks support for the emancipation of Black slaves should be conditional on their being more ‘civilised’ than ‘freshly imported barbarians’ from Africa. There is of course also justified condemnation of the use of the insulting term ‘barbarians’ as applied to Africans. However, these interpretations are wrong. Marx is giving *conditional* support neither for slavery nor emancipation. Both Marx’s condemnation of slavery and his support for emancipation are *unconditional*.

### Henry Carey and the Bourgeois Viability of Emancipation

Remember, firstly, that Marx is telling Engels what he thinks is most interesting about Carey’s book. Why does Marx find this argument of Carey’s interesting? The answer becomes obvious once we get past the antiquated and offensive language of ‘barbarians’, a term used by Carey in his own discussion, and one used by Marx and Engels in a variety of contexts in a variety of ways.

Carey was a prominent – if not the *most* prominent – economist of nineteenth-century America, now ‘often called the founder of the American school of economics’.<sup>19</sup> According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1911, his 1837–40 work *Principles of Political Economy*, ‘which was translated into Italian and Swedish, soon became the standard representative in the United States of the school of economic thought which, with some interruptions, has since [i.e., up to 1911] dominated the tariff system of that country.’<sup>20</sup> And he became

18 van Ree 2019, p. 65.

19 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2021.

20 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911.

‘the trusted adviser of both [President] Lincoln and [Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P.] Chase.’<sup>21</sup> Thus, what Marx found interesting was that this prominent economist, spokesperson of American industrial capitalism in the North, who would go on to become Lincoln’s economic adviser, was arguing that American slaves are ‘capable of being emancipated’, i.e., their emancipation can be justified from an economic standpoint – it is economically viable. Just three years prior Marx and Engels *themselves* had predicted that the forces of American industrial capitalism would act to emancipate the slaves as soon as it became profitable for them to do so, i.e., as soon as the slaves became more valuable as free workers than as slaves:

American cotton production is based on slavery. As soon as industry has developed to the point when the cotton monopoly of the United States has become intolerable to it, cotton will be successfully produced in vast quantities in other countries, which almost everywhere can now only be done through *free workers*. But as soon as the free labour of other countries provides industry with its cotton supplies in sufficient quantity and more cheaply than the slave labour of the United States, American slavery will have been broken at the same time as the American cotton monopoly, and the slaves will be emancipated because as slaves they will have become unusable.<sup>22</sup>

This is why Marx italicises *capable of being emancipated*, so as to emphasise the striking confirmation of their own view in Carey’s conclusion. Note that there is no mention here of the Black slaves’ readiness for emancipation depending on their level of ‘civilisation’. Lest one think that this analysis is an instance of ‘economic reductionism’ and thus somehow insensitive to Black agency, it should be borne in mind that *exactly the same* analysis was made a few years later by Martin Delany, the ‘father’ of Black nationalism. Delany

hoped to establish a cotton-producing settlement overseen by African Americans on land purchased from the ruler of Abeokuta. Such a settlement, he believed, would help to make Africa into an economic power by inspiring cotton production throughout the continent. And if that were to happen, he maintained, the South’s cotton monopoly would be broken and slavery would soon come to an end.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Levermore 1890, p. 571.

22 Marx and Engels 1978, pp. 501–2.

23 See Levine (ed.) 2003, p. 11.

But what about Carey's comparison between the Black slavery practised in Jamaica and the other British plantation colonies, and Black slavery in the United States? What does his talk of 'barbarians' amount to and what relevance does it have for determining whether American slaves are 'capable of being emancipated'? The British abolished slavery throughout their colonies in the 1830s, but by the 1850s 'increasing numbers of prominent Britons [had come] to view "the mighty experiment" [of emancipation] as a dismal failure'.<sup>24</sup> Carey concurred, and traced the economic failure of immediate emancipation in England's colonies to the conditions of its slaves prior to emancipation, which he contrasted with the conditions of slaves in America.

In the islands [of the British West Indies] it was held to be cheaper to buy slaves than to raise them, and the sexes were out of all proportion to each other. Here [i.e., in the US], importation was small, and almost the whole increase, large as it has been, has resulted from the excess of births over deaths. In the islands, the slave was generally a barbarian, speaking an unknown tongue, and working with men like himself, in gangs, with scarcely a chance for improvement. Here, he was generally a being born on the soil, speaking the same language with his owner; and often working in the field with him, with many advantages for the development of his faculties. In the islands, the land-owners clung to slavery as the sheet-anchor of their hopes. Here, on the contrary, slavery had gradually been abolished in all the States north of Mason & Dixon's line, and Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky were all, at the date of emancipation in the islands, preparing for the early adoption of measures looking to its entire abolition.<sup>25</sup>

... *The Prospective Review*, (Nov. 1852,) seeing what has happened in the British colonies, and speaking of the possibility of a similar course of action on this side of the Atlantic, says – [‘]We have had experience enough in our own colonies, not to wish to see the experiment tried elsewhere on a larger scale. ... we have no reason to suppose that the whole tragi-comedy would not be re-enacted in the Slave States of America, if slavery were summarily abolished by act of Congress to-morrow. Property among the plantations consists only of land and negroes: emancipate the negroes – and the planters have no longer any capital for the cultivation of the land. ... It is allowed on all hands that the negroes as a race will not work longer than is necessary to supply the simplest comforts of life. It

24 Davis 2006, p. 238.

25 Carey 1853, pp. 19–20.

would be wonderful were it otherwise. A people have been degraded and ground down for a century and a half: systematically kept in ignorance for five generations of any needs and enjoyments beyond those of the savage: and then it is made matter of complaint that they will not apply themselves to labour for their higher comforts and more refined luxuries, of which they cannot know the value![']

The systematic degradation here referred to is probably quite true as regards the British Islands, where 660,000 were all that remained of almost two millions that had been imported [i.e., the two-thirds mortality rate Marx refers to – G.S.]; but it is quite a mistake to suppose it so in regard to this country [i.e., the US], in which there are now found ten persons for every one ever imported, and all advancing by gradual steps toward civilization and freedom.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, while emancipation had proved an economic failure in Jamaica *et al.*, where most of the slaves who were emancipated were Africans who wanted nothing more than to abandon the plantations and work their own land, it would not necessarily fail in the US, where slaves were almost completely 'Americanised' and therefore more amenable to integrating into American society as free wage-labourers post-emancipation.

Carey's ultimate prescription, as Marx points out in his letter to Engels, is protectionism rather than immediate emancipation. Marx has no special sympathy for protectionism as against free trade,<sup>27</sup> and is certainly no 'harmoniser' like Carey, who is actually quite defensive in the book towards American

26 Carey 1853, pp. 32–3.

27 'Do not imagine, gentlemen, that in criticizing freedom of trade we have the least intention of defending the system of protection. One may declare oneself an enemy of the constitutional regime without declaring oneself a friend of the ancient regime. Moreover, the protectionist system is nothing but a means of establishing large-scale industry in any given country, that is to say, of making it dependent upon the world market, and from the moment that dependence upon the world market is established, there is already more or less dependence upon free trade. Besides this, the protective system helps to develop free competition within a country. Hence we see that in countries where the bourgeoisie is beginning to make itself felt as a class, in Germany for example, it makes great efforts to obtain protective duties. They serve the bourgeoisie as weapons against feudalism and absolute government, as a means for the concentration of its own powers and for the realization of free trade within the same country. But, in general, the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favour of free trade.' See Marx 1992, p. 154.

slaveholders, whom he views as victims of British free-trade policies. Indeed, in 1869 Marx writes sneeringly to Engels apropos Carey's 1858–60 *Principles of Social Science*, that 'Mr. Carey, as a harmoniser, defended [the slave-owners] in all his previous works.'<sup>28</sup> But what interests Marx about Carey's work is that it is nonetheless arguing that America's slaves are 'capable of being emancipated', contrary to the protestations of naysayers – like the English *Prospective Review* which Carey quotes – that emancipation was a disaster in the British colonies and so will be a disaster in the US.

Thus, we can see that the aforementioned interpreters seem to have got things backwards. Understandably put off by the word 'barbarians' and the phrase 'capable of being emancipated', they conclude that Marx must be claiming that the African slaves of Jamaica *et al.* are *incapable* of being – i.e., should not be – emancipated. Such a conclusion would be remarkable indeed, for it would signal a complete reversal in 1853 of Marx's position up to that point. But none of these commentators look into Carey's book itself, and most fail to even note the discussion of Carey's book as the context that elicits Marx's comments.

### Marx on Jamaica

Nonetheless, for the sake of argument let us entertain the view that Marx's support for the emancipation of Black slaves is conditional on their level of 'civilisation'. One way to test this view would be to examine Marx's other writings on Jamaica. If the critical commentators are correct, then we should expect to find Marx claiming that the former slaves should not have been emancipated, or that they should be re-enslaved. However, we find just the opposite.

Just four years after the 'barbarians' passage, Marx was composing a draft of *Capital*, part of which would later be published as the *Grundrisse*. In his 'Chapter on Capital', in order to elucidate the nature of capital and wage-labour as transitory socio-historical relations as opposed to eternal or necessary ones, he drew on the example of the situation of the formerly enslaved Blacks and their descendants in Jamaica, about whom an anonymous author ('Expertus') had recently wrote to the editor of *The Times* of London (of which Marx was an avid reader). The author's argument is that England should cease supporting the costly suppression of the slave-trade and the citizenship of Jamaican Blacks, unless it finds a way to provide the colonies with labourers who will restore value to its plantations. In language reminiscent of Carey's discussion,

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<sup>28</sup> Marx 1988, p. 384.

but far more virulently racist, 'Expertus' begins by describing the adverse consequences and economic ruin he sees as having followed from emancipation:

The freed West-Indian negro slave will not till the soil for wages; the free son of the ex-slave is as obstinate as his sire. He will cultivate lands which he has not bought for his own yams, mangoes, and potatoes. These satisfy his wants: he does not care for yours. Cotton, and sugar, and coffee, and tobacco, he cares little enough for them. And what matters it to him that the Englishman has sunk his thousands and tens of thousands on mills, machinery, and plant, which now totter, on the languishing estate, that for years has only returned beggary and debts? He eats his yams, and sniggers at 'Buckra.'

... Twenty millions of gold [i.e. the compensation paid to the slaveholders upon emancipation – G.S.] have been distilled from the brains and muscles of the free English labourer of every degree to fashion the West-Indian negro into a 'free and independent' labourer. 'Free and independent' enough he has become, God knows, but labourer he is not; and, so far as I can see, never will be under the present system of things. He will sing hymns; he will quote texts; but honest, steady industry he not only detests, but despises.

Exasperated, he asks, 'Is there no way of filling some of our islands with an adequate population – a population which will feel the stimulus of competition sufficiently to be urged to work? Is there no mode of inundating that proud and lazy Quashee who cumpers our lands with an influx of men who will give a fair day's work for a fair day's wages?' (One can see from this use of 'a fair day's work for a fair day's wages' how effortlessly it can be made into an apologia for the subordination of the working population, something Marx and Engels were no doubt aware of.) The anonymous author then suggests that in order to provide this labouring population England could perhaps import 'Coolies from India' or even buy African slaves, 'free' them, and then employ them as indentured labourers for a fixed contract according to strict labour demands. He repeats the now-familiar line that emancipation will not be tried by other nations after England's failure to demonstrate its viability. In breathtakingly racist tones, 'Expertus' then concludes defiantly:

But if we are not to try this experiment, for God's sake do not sacrifice English pith, toil, and money to Quashee. If Quashee won't raise cotton, sugar, and coffee, don't pamper his idleness by reducing other tropical colonies to the state of our own. Do not enter on a crusade to forbid the

nigger from working. Cruelty to the African may be a bad thing; but, in my opinion, cruelty to our own kith, kin, and countrymen is much worse. And our present system involves both kinds of cruelty.<sup>29</sup>

So, given the hypothesis that Marx thinks Black slaves should not be emancipated unless they are adequately 'civilised', we might expect him to *agree* with 'Expertus' that these Caribbean Blacks are undeserving of freedom and that means should be found and employed for making them or their substitutes 'give a fair day's work for a fair day's wage'.

Let us test this hypothesis. Here is the lesson Marx draws from the above screed (aside from reproducing the author's English epithets like 'Quashee' and the n-word, Marx does not quote 'Expertus' at all):

*The Times* of [21] November 1857 contains a most endearing scream of rage from a West Indian planter. With great moral indignation this advocate – by way of plea for the reintroduction of Negro slavery – explains how the *Quashees* (the free NIGGERS of Jamaica)<sup>30</sup> content themselves to produce only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption and apart from this 'use value', regard loafing itself (INDULGENCE and IDLENESS) as the real luxury article; how they don't give a damn about sugar and the fixed capital invested in the PLANTATIONS, but rather react with malicious pleasure and sardonic smiles when a planter goes to ruin, and even exploit their acquired Christianity as a cover for this sardonic mood and indolence. They have ceased to be slaves, not in order to become wage workers, but SELF-SUSTAINING PEASANTS, working for their own meagre consumption. Capital as capital does not exist for them, because wealth made independent in general exists *only* either through *direct* forced labour, slavery, or through *mediated* forced labour, *wage labour*.<sup>31</sup>

It should be clear enough which side Marx is on. Marx immediately detects the class and race prejudice of the 'West India Planter' behind the pen of 'Expertus', and delights in the irony of an argument *for* slavery which employs moral indignation at the workers' idleness. 'Expertus' had in fact spun his argument not as a 'plea for the reintroduction of Negro slavery', but as the only sure

29 Expertus 1857.

30 Both the *Collected Works* and the Nicolaus translation of the *Grundrisse* give 'blacks' instead of 'niggers', but in the original German text the phrase used is 'die freien niggers von Jamaica'. See Marx 1983b, p. 245.

31 Marx 1986, p. 251. Cf. Marx 1973, pp. 325–6.

method of convincing Spain and America of the viability of free Black labour, and even as the only guarantee that they would not reimpose slavery on the British colonies themselves! But Marx, unlike what we might imagine to be the response of one sympathetic to the ‘emancipate only if civilised’ view, is not taken in by this ploy and sees clearly that this is a ‘plea for the reintroduction of Negro slavery’. He is clearly sympathetic to the Black workers who ‘don’t give a damn’ about capital and who mock the ruined planters. They are, as Marx puts it, peasants concerned only with use-values and their own enjoyment of the good life. Because of the natural wealth provided by abundant unowned land and good weather, the free Blacks of Jamaica are not compelled by circumstances to work for wages to survive. (‘Expertus’ had claimed that Barbados did not have this problem, for ‘the pressure there has been that of people on subsistence, not of redundancy on the people; the labourers have been looking for masters, not the masters for men.’)<sup>32</sup> This all proves Marx’s point that capital is a transitory socio-historical relation dependent on the forced labour – whether ‘direct’ or ‘mediated’ – of the worker.

Eight years later in October of 1865, when poor Black workers erupted in protest at the colonial government in Jamaica, prompting brutal reprisals directed by the colonial governor Eyre, Marx and Engels followed the events closely in the British press. In response to what became known as the Morant Bay Rebellion, Eyre imposed martial law and upwards of 400 Jamaicans were killed, ‘many of them hanged in reprisals after the fighting had finished’.<sup>33</sup> If the hypothesis that Marx believed Black slaves in Jamaica incapable or undeserving of emancipation were true, we would again expect him to be less than sympathetic to these rebelling, poor Black workers. After all, according to this hypothesis, for Marx they were either former slaves or descendants of slaves who had been emancipated ‘before their time’. It is thus extremely interesting to find that, despite Engels’s use of the n-word, both he and Marx are patently on the side of the Black rebels and are appalled (but not surprised) by the mass of extra-judicial killings committed by the English.

*The Daily Telegraph* of 17 November 1865 had relayed the news of the rebellion by first playing up the alleged unprovoked atrocities committed by the rebels and then celebrating the devastating British military response.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, Engels from the outset takes the side of the rebels and is aghast at the behaviour of the British, writing to Marx on the same day as the *Telegraph* piece: ‘What do you say to the NIGGER-rebellion in Jamaica and the atrocities

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32 Expertus 1857.

33 Huzzey 2015.

34 Hobbs *et al.* 1865.

perpetrated by the English? *The Telegraph* says today: “We should be very sorry if the right was taken away from any British officer to shoot or hang all and every British subject found in arms against the British Crown!”<sup>35</sup> Three days later *The Times* of London published a brazenly racist apologia for British behaviour, protesting that ‘It were useless to follow the special pleadings of those who in the atrocities committed on their countryman refuse to see aught but the grievances of negroes and the wickedness of the white race.’ Seeking to ‘refute the platitudes of rhetorical sentimentality’, the paper claimed that ‘the negro had no grievances – no grievances, at least, but what he had a legal mode of redressing’, and that as a peasant he had it better than any peasant in England, Scotland, France, or Belgium. Continued *The Times*: ‘He had Anglo-Saxon institutions and a constitutional form of Government. Within two generations of African savagery he acquired what the English people won after six centuries of civilised despotism. If he had wrongs, he had the legal means of obtaining redress.’ *The Times* then proffered a ‘racial’ (and very racist) explanation of why the rebellion occurred, given the supposed bliss of Black life in Jamaica:

Why, then, did he not avail himself of these? Why did he plot foul treasons and murders? The answer is not far to seek. The wonderful influence of race has operated as strongly on the negro as on the Slave, the Magyar, and the Celt. The negro views with jealousy and hatred – we speak, of course, generally and subject to exceptions – the contiguity of another race numerically inferior, but which he feels to be morally superior, to his own. He dreams of the glorious island in which he lives being owned in perpetuity by himself and his posterity.<sup>36</sup>

The paper then invokes the boogeyman of Haiti and its ‘barbaric independence’, claiming that the Jamaican Blacks were inspired by the neighbouring country which flattered the Black man’s ‘pride, his vanity, his indolence’. The paper ends its column by hoping that the British response will halt the ‘treasonous infection’ from spreading to other Caribbean islands, and by praising the loyalty of the Maroons who helped put down the rebellion.

Marx, reading this, writes to Engels the same day:

The Jamaican business is typical of the utter turpitude of the ‘TRUE ENGLISHMAN’. These fellows are as bad as the Russians in every respect. But, says the good old *Times*, these DAMNED ROGUES ENJOYED ‘ALL THE

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35 Engels 1987a, p. 197.

36 *The Times* 1865.

LIBERTIES OF AN ANGLO-SAXON CONSTITUTION'. I.e. they ENJOYED THE LIBERTY, amongst others, of having their hides taxed to raise money for the PLANTERS to import COOLIES and thus depress their own labour market below the minimum.... The Irish affair and the Jamaica BUTCHERIES were all that was needed after the American war to complete the unmasking of English hypocrisy!<sup>37</sup>

Whereas *The Times* had dismissed the Blacks' grievances, blamed their rebellion on racial envy and Haiti, and defended the actions of the British military, Marx does just the opposite. He points out the rebels' legitimate economic grievances, born of the class struggle waged by the planters – the British government having since taken the advice of 'Expertus' and set about importing to Jamaica indentured labourers from India<sup>38</sup> – and condemns in the strongest terms the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of British pretensions to moral supremacy.

A few weeks later Engels is increasingly aghast as more details emerge about British behaviour in crushing the rebellion: 'Every post brings news of worse atrocities in Jamaica. The letters from the English officers about their heroic deeds against unarmed NIGGERS are beyond words. Here the spirit of the English army is at last expressing itself quite uninhibitedly. "THE SOLDIERS ENJOY IT." Even *The Manchester Guardian* has had to come out against the authorities in Jamaica this time.'<sup>39</sup> Then when a Parliamentary Commission condemned the actions of the British and *The Times* was forced to eat its words and side with outraged public opinion, Engels wrote to Marx in March 1866: 'Fine revelations from Jamaica. And what an embarrassment they are to *The Times* ... The paper is going DOWN very rapidly.'<sup>40</sup>

With the massacre of poor Black workers and the economic factors that had prompted the rebellion in Jamaica fresh in his mind, Marx warned German workers not to become the tools of British capitalists who were trying to roll back concessions won by the nascent tailors' union in London. On 4 May 1866, writing in the German press on behalf of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, he wrote: 'The purpose of this

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37 Marx 1987a, p. 199. For historical evidence proving Black workers themselves complained in the lead-up to the rebellion that the importation of indentured labourers – funded through burdensome taxation – hurt their wages and employment prospects, and in general strong support for Marx's analysis of the causes of the conflict, see Heuman 1991.

38 Erickson 1934, p. 144.

39 Engels 1987b, p. 205.

40 Engels 1987c, p. 236.

importation [of German tailors to Edinburgh] is the same as that of the importation of Indian COOLIES to Jamaica, namely, *perpetuation of slavery*.<sup>41</sup>

In a letter to Engels two months later, Marx commented on the recent mass meeting organised by the Reform League to agitate for adult-male suffrage. ‘Tens of thousands of workers, some of them armed’<sup>42</sup> met in Hyde Park, London, nearly leading to violent clashes with the police and military. After opining that the British working class ‘will accomplish nothing without a really bloody clash with those in power’, he criticised the conciliatory measures taken by some of the League’s leaders so as to avoid a violent confrontation while, in the meantime, ‘that cur Knox, the police magistrate of Marylebone, is sending people down in a summary fashion, which shows what would happen if London were Jamaica.’<sup>43</sup> For Marx, the Black workers’ uprising had become a symbol of both workers’ rebellion and ruling-class retribution.

That this is so can further be seen from the fact that two years later in 1868, in a history of the International Workingmen’s Association attributed to Wilhelm Eichhoff but written with Marx’s ‘active assistance’<sup>44</sup> and on the basis of his extensive notes, documents, and advice, Eichhoff and Marx again invoked the rebellion in Jamaica. Speaking of the widespread strikes that had just taken place in Belgium, where ‘Hunger and misery drove the wretches to rebellion and pillage’ and in response ‘the capitalists let the government and military forces intervene and most deliberately provoked bloody conflicts in which many workers were killed, wounded or thrown behind bars’, Eichhoff and Marx state: ‘In modern history only the scenes of carnage and bloodshed during the Negro uprising in Jamaica can compare with these atrocities. Here, as in Jamaica, the capitalists celebrated bloody orgies. Here, as in Jamaica, they hoped to break what was left of the workers’ spirit of resistance and self-esteem by acts of extreme brutality.’<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Marx again invoked the ruthless crushing of the Jamaican rebellion the following year in 1869. Writing on behalf of the General Council of the International Workingmen’s Association ‘*To the Workmen of Europe and the United States*’ about ‘*The Belgian Massacres*’, he opposed his own explanation of the clashes, based in class struggle, to the view that the Belgian authorities, under French Imperial influence, were looking for a pretext to justify French intervention:

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41 Marx 1985a, p. 162.

42 Sazonov 1987, p. 640, n. 366.

43 Marx 1987b, p. 300.

44 Vasin 1985, p. 517, n. 394.

45 Eichhoff 1985, p. 359.

Other politicians, on the contrary, suspect the Belgian ministers to be sold to the Tuileries, and to periodically enact these horrible scenes of a mock civil war, with the deliberate aim of affording Louis Bonaparte a pretext for saving society in Belgium as he has saved it in France. But was Ex-Governor Eyre ever accused of having organized the Negro massacre at Jamaica in order to wrest that island from England and place it into the hands of the United States? No doubt the Belgian ministers are excellent patriots of the Eyre pattern. As he was the unscrupulous tool of the West-Indian planter, they are the unscrupulous tools of the Belgian capitalist.<sup>46</sup>

How mistaken was Carlos Moore, then, when he averred in the 1970s that ‘to Marx and Engels’, the struggles of Black workers in Jamaica and elsewhere

were, above all, only ‘nigger’ events. This is seen in Engels’ short reference to the Jamaican insurrection of 1865, led by Paul Bogle. In a letter to Marx, dated December 1, 1865, Engels expressed no more than an amused ‘sympathy’ for the ‘pitiful’ struggle against British bayonets and rifles on the part of these ‘unarmed Niggers.’<sup>47</sup>

We have seen that there was far more to their commentary on events in Jamaica than Moore was and is ready to admit. For doing so would seriously jeopardise his mission to paint Marx and Engels as ‘Aryan’-style white supremacists.

Wulf Hund, who thinks Moore treats the issue of Marx’s anti-Black racism ‘denunciatively’ from a ‘distortive perspective’,<sup>48</sup> nonetheless himself argues that Marx ignores the Haitian Revolution because for Marx, ‘On the eve of revolution, the black slaves there were predominantly not a “native product” (as in the United States) but “freshly imported barbarians” (as in Jamaica).’<sup>49</sup> Thus Hund employs precisely the same reasoning as Moore: Marx ignored the Haitian revolution, as he ignored all the other uprisings of Black workers, including in Jamaica, because these were mere ‘n-word’ or ‘barbarian’ events. But if, as I have tried to show, this argument fails in the case of Jamaica and the Morant Bay Rebellion, why should it succeed in the case of Haiti and its revolution? Although Marx had little to say about the Haitian Revolution, he

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46 Marx 1985b, p. 49.

47 Moore 1974, p. 140.

48 Hund 2021, pp. 77, 91, n. 7.

49 Hund 2021, p. 87.

clearly sided with ‘the insurgent Negroes of Haiti’<sup>50</sup> in their struggle to free themselves, recognised Haiti as a ‘Negro Republic’,<sup>51</sup> and noted the pivotal role played by Haiti and its president Alexandre Pétion in ‘the South American revolution’ – by providing Simón Bolívar with arms in exchange for Bolívar’s promise to emancipate Black slaves<sup>52</sup> (an event Anténor Firmin later adduced as evidence of Haiti’s world-historic significance in his *Equality of the Human Races*).<sup>53</sup> So, while Hund’s query about Marx’s relative silence on the Haitian Revolution remains an important one, his contention that it stemmed from Marx’s anti-Black racism – specifically the belief that Haitian Blacks were ‘barbarians’ incapable of making history – is firmly refuted by the textual evidence.

### The Free Black Worker in Capital

Recently the distinguished cultural anthropologist and scholar of African religions, J. Lorand Matory, has followed Moore and Mills in attempting to make the case that the Eurocentric Marx’s free workers were all implicitly or explicitly white. Matory claims that ‘Marx’s greatest feat of theoretical abstraction and distortion’ can be found in the brief concluding chapter of *Capital* Volume 1 on ‘The Modern Theory of Colonization’, where

Marx celebrates – as counterexamples of the metaphorical ‘enslavement’ of the free (white) worker and as examples of his proper condition – those parts of the US and Australian settler colonies where almost all of the (white) workers have land of their own, where they can thereby resist the capitalist’s coercive demand for their labor, and where they therefore enjoy a high standard of living and culture.<sup>54</sup>

In his reading of Marx’s account of the struggle between capital and labour in the colonies of the Americas, Matory thus imagines that Marx means to refer only to white workers as the representatives of labour. According to Matory, ‘Black “wage slaves”’ – i.e., free Black workers or wage-labourers – is ‘a category Marx fails even to acknowledge’.<sup>55</sup> The text, however, does not support such a reading.

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50 Marx 1976, p. 309.

51 Marx 1984, p. 229.

52 Marx 1982, p. 224.

53 Firmin 2002, p. 396.

54 Matory 2018, p. 71.

55 Matory 2018, p. 72.

We might have wondered how reliable a reader of Marx Matory is by attending to his very next sentence, where he seeks to admit that ‘At moments, Marx does lament the fact that similar land in another settler colony, South Africa, was stolen from its indigenous African inhabitants.’<sup>56</sup> The passage Matory cites in fact refers not to anything written by Marx but to a discussion of South Africa from Ernest Mandel’s Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Capital* Volume 1.

When we do attend closely to the text in question, namely the final chapter of *Capital* Volume 1 on ‘The Modern Theory of Colonization’, we find not only that Matory is mistaken but that it is *precisely here* where Marx incorporated his earlier thoughts on the Jamaican class struggle into the fabric of *Capital*. For in Marx’s footnote to the *title* of this chapter, he tells the reader explicitly that he is dealing with both (white) European immigrant workers and formerly enslaved (Black) workers: ‘We are dealing here with true colonies, i.e. virgin soil colonized by free immigrants. The United States is, economically speaking, still a colony of Europe. *Apart from this, old plantations where the abolition of slavery has completely revolutionized earlier relationships belong here.*’<sup>57</sup> Recall that *Capital* Volume 1 was published in 1867, within two years of both the abolition of slavery in the US and the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Hence Marx is including both the newly freed African-American workers and the other free Black workers of the colonies in his discussion of the colonial class struggle.

Later in the chapter Marx explicitly discusses the class struggle between (Black) workers and capitalists in the Caribbean (i.e., the West Indies) by way of a take-down of ‘that mild, free-trading, vulgar economist [Gustave de] Molinari’, in a manner reminiscent of his earlier criticisms of ‘Expertus’ and *The Times*. Marx first quotes Molinari and then adds some acerbic commentary:

‘In the colonies where slavery has been abolished without the compulsory labour being replaced with an equivalent quantity of free labour, there has occurred the opposite of what happens every day before our eyes. Simple workers have been seen to exploit in their turn the industrial *entrepreneurs*, demanding from them wages which bear absolutely no relation to the legitimate share in the product which they ought to receive. The planters were unable to obtain for their sugar a sufficient price to cover the increase in wages, and were obliged to furnish the extra amount, at first out of their profits, and then out of their very capital. A considerable number of planters have been ruined as a result, while others have closed down their businesses in order to avoid the ruin which

56 Matory 2018, p. 71, citing Mandel in Marx 1976, p. 48.

57 Marx 1976, p. 93; emphasis mine.

threatened them.... It is doubtless better that these accumulations of capital should be destroyed than that generations of men should perish' (how generous of M. Molinari) 'but would it not be better if both survived?'<sup>58</sup> M. Molinari, M. Molinari! What then becomes of the ten commandments, of Moses and the Prophets, of the law of supply and demand, if in Europe the '*entrepreneur*' can cut down the worker's 'legitimate share' and in the West Indies the workers can cut down the *entrepreneur's*? And what, if you please, is this 'legitimate share', which, according to your own admission, the capitalist in Europe daily neglects to pay? Over yonder, in the colonies, where the workers are so 'simple' as to 'exploit' the capitalist, M. Molinari feels a powerful itch to use police methods to set on the right road that law of supply and demand which works automatically everywhere else.<sup>59</sup>

Molinari's lament for the ruin of sugar planters unable to employ profit-creating cheap wage-labour is exactly the complaint 'Expertus' had made, while his 'itch to use police methods' to discipline recalcitrant labour recalls the bloody and repressive aftermath of the Jamaican rebellion.

### Marx: Against Black Slavery and For Black Labour

So, to return to the claim for which these passages furnish essential evidence, it is exceedingly unlikely that Marx held the 'emancipate only if civilised' view attributed to him by the scholars whose interpretation we explored above. Marx did not think that the Jamaican Blacks who had been emancipated by the British in the 1830s, though majority African-born, were undeserving or incapable of emancipation. On the contrary, he recognised them as workers – peasants and wage-labourers – who rightly fought attempts by the planter class and British government to reestablish conditions akin to slavery on the island. Far from believing that slaves must first be 'civilised' before they can or ought to be freed, in *Capital* Volume I Marx even criticised the British Emancipation Act of 1833 – which 'forced the "freed" slaves to undergo a period of uncompensated "apprenticeship"'<sup>60</sup> – for having 'administered freedom drop by drop'.<sup>61</sup>

58 Molinari 1846, pp. 51–2.

59 Marx 1976, p. 937.

60 Davis 2006, p. 238.

61 Marx 1976, p. 392.

What all of this shows – quite clearly, I think – is that Marx viewed defences of Black slavery (and of slavery in general) as self-evidently absurd from the standpoint of justice. For Marx, if one’s argument involved a moral justification or apologia for slavery then this stood as an immediate reductio of one’s position. He never abandoned the principles he articulated in some of his first work as a radical journalist: that ‘slavery, can never become lawful [i.e., just], even if it exists a thousand times over as a law’;<sup>62</sup> and that ‘*man* [as opposed to any idol or deity – G.S.] *is the highest being for man*’, that there is a ‘*categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’.<sup>63</sup>

Even more than this, though, what our exploration of Marx’s neglected writings on free Black labour shows is just how misguided it is to attempt to drive a wedge between Marxism and Black liberation. The representatives of the ‘Marx as anti-Black racist’ interpretation have got it wrong – in their rush to subject Marx to a race-first reading and uncover what they feel must be his inevitable racism, they have neglected to look past the epithets and at what he actually said.

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62 Marx 1975a, p. 162.

63 Marx 1975b, p. 182.

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