Marx's America

Marx was born 200 years ago today. His radical politics were indelibly shaped by his encounters with American life.

A Marx art installation in Trier, Germany. Cordylus / Flickr

In the early years of radio, the BBC aired a series about famous exiles in London. One episode included an interview with an elderly man long retired from his job in the British Museum's reading room. The man was asked if he remembered a patron by the name of Karl Marx, who for many years toiled at the museum on what would become his masterpiece, *Das Kapital*.

At first the retiree drew a blank, but after he was given several clues — Marx sat in the same seat every day, wore a thick graying beard, endured painful boils, and endlessly requested materials about political economy — the man's memory came alive. "Oh Mr Marx, yes, to be sure. Gave us a lot of work 'e did, with all 'is calls for books and papers. And then one day 'e just stopped coming. And you know what's a funny thing, sir? *Nobody's ever 'eard of 'im since!*"

Marx himself half expected *Capital* to tumble into oblivion. As he was preparing to send it to press in 1867, he suggested that his friend Friedrich Engels read Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*. It was a sardonic recommendation. *The Unknown Masterpiece* tells the story of a painter who spends decades laboring on a single painting in an effort to render a perfectly accurate representation of reality. When a fellow artist scorns the piece as unintelligible, the painter hastily destroys it in a blaze of fire, and dies soon after.

Yet despite Marx's cautious expectations, his masterpiece was not doomed to oblivion. *Capital* unfolded the workings of capitalism in such a profound fashion that people across the planet have been reading it since the Gilded Age, when Marx's theory that capitalism was a system that pitted capital against labor seemed to have revealed itself as the truth. Marx's fate, in this way, has been tied to the fate of capitalism.

To read Marx is to wrestle with the modern world that capitalism has made. This includes modern America — *especially* modern America. Because the US is the nation in world history most committed to capitalism, and because Marx is the world's most enduring theorist of capitalism, Marx is a veritable American alter ego.

And indeed, Marx often had the United States on his mind. Some of his grandest ideas were formed with the United States in view, and some of America's greatest thinkers later drew on his rich work to give their own

accounts of capitalism and American life. Two hundred years after Marx's birth, delving into the relationship between the famed radical and the United States provides us with a deeper, more intimate portrait of Marx and his ideas.

Marx and the Civil War

The United States began playing an outsized role in Marx's thinking in the 1850s, when he was hired as the European correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, a paper that at the time boasted more subscribers than any other in the world. Writing for an American audience compelled Marx to focus his attention on events across the Atlantic, a task made easier by his ongoing correspondence with several comrades who had emigrated to the US following the failed 1848 revolutions in Europe. With the help of fellow radicals like Joseph Wedemeyer — later a general in the Union Army — Marx furnished insights for *Tribune* readers through much of the 1850s.

Marx lost his spot with the *Tribune* amid the crisis of the Civil War. Impoverished and in desperate need of another means of income, the exiled revolutionary sought out journalism work elsewhere. He found it in a Vienna-based newspaper, which hired him to write about the Civil War. Marx's Civil War writings would prove influential not only in shaping European radicals' attitudes towards the titanic conflict, but in how Marx himself thought about capitalism.

Those thoughts were formed in the hothouse of British politics. At the outset of the war, many British elites wanted to ally with the Confederacy, recognizing that the booming English textile industry relied on the South for cheap, plentiful cotton. Most of the English working class, by contrast, were partisans of the Union cause. This was particularly true of those with radical politics, including Marx and his fellow members of the International Workingmen's Association (later known as the First International).

Marx's stance was at once moral and strategic: he abhorred slavery full stop, while also seeing the Union cause as an important step towards working-class emancipation. A nation built entirely on free labor, he reasoned, would create more favorable conditions for organizing workers.

It was through this lens — the close connection between the abolition of slavery and working-class struggle — that Marx viewed Lincoln, at least in his writings for public consumption. As he commented in a letter to Lincoln on behalf of the International: "The workingmen of Europe consider it an earnest of the epoch to come, that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of the social world."

Marx was often more circumspect in his private correspondence. There he described Lincoln's celebrated oratory as "the trite summonses that one lawyer sends to an opposing lawyer," and called Lincoln an "average man of good will." But in a strange way, this was a compliment. "Never has the New World secured a greater victory than in the demonstration that with its political and social organization," Marx wrote, "average men of good will suffice to do that which in the Old World would have required heroes to do!"

Marx carried his views on slavery and capitalism into his more theoretical works. In *Capital* — first published in 1867, two years after the Union victory — Marx used the rise and fall of American slavery as a metaphor for the rise and what he assumed would be the eventual fall of capitalism. The Civil War, Marx argued in the introduction, was a "harbinger of socialist revolutions to come."

In thinking about the impact the Civil War had on *Capital*, some Marx scholars have gone a step further, focusing on how it structured Marx's most famous book at a deeper level. The slaves who freed themselves during the Civil War, and the English workers who supported emancipation, recognized that control over time was central to autonomy. And autonomy was the ultimate aim for the working class — the precondition for living the good life.

As a result, *Capital* connected the abolition of slavery to the working day. "A new life," Marx wrote, "immediately arose from the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours' agitation, which ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California, with the seven-league boots of the locomotive."

What happened in America, Marx recognized, had worldwide implications.

Marx and Du Bois

Marx's Civil War writings did not die with him in 1883. They helped shape W. E. B. Du Bois's 1935 landmark book *Black Reconstruction in America*, which expanded on Marx's work by more fully accounting for the plunders of slavery.

In *Capital*, Marx had observed:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of an era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.

Elsewhere, Marx argued that as capitalism expanded its reach across the globe it would consign slavery and other forms of "primitive accumulation" to the dustbin of history. In the Civil War, it was the Union side that represented the forces of capitalism, and thus the Union side that was also positioned to destroy slavery. Not only bad at an ethical level, slavery was also bad because it slowed the expansion of a capitalist labor system and, thus, the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness.

Du Bois did not take issue with this analysis, per se. But, he noted, it failed to account for the role of black slaves who were soon to be free. Building on Marx's argument that the Civil War was a revolutionary opening — a proletarian revolution within a bourgeois republic — Du Bois then added an important revision: black slaves, not industrial workers, represented the proletarian vanguard. To Du Bois, black resistance during the Civil War was nothing less than a "general strike." By refusing work on Confederate plantations, and by swamping approaching Union battle lines, slaves helped win the Civil War and in the process freed themselves. This was, in the words of Du Bois, "one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian Revolution, had ever seen."

Why Marxism? Because, in Du Bois's words, "black labor was the foundation not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale." When black slaves revolted against slavery, they were revolting against global capitalism — and fulfilling Marx's historic vision for the working class.

But class struggle cut both ways. When the Union armies deserted the South in 1877, the revolution the slaves had inaugurated was smashed and black labor came under white control once again. The national elite had decided that it needed a chastened black labor force, and it discovered that it could turn the Southern white working class against blacks to keep them in their proverbial chains. Reconstruction was no more.

Du Bois's grand historical narrative, though brilliant and original, owed much to Marx. Du Bois might not have reached his conclusions — might not have written a book that would later revolutionize American historiography — if Marx had not helped him grapple with the forces of modern history. And in turn, Du Bois's position as an American at the margins allowed him to mine Marx's ideas for alternative means of understanding modern history — enlarging our understanding of capitalism in the process.

Marx and American Exceptionalism

The United States was a case study in Marx's theory of modernization. Here, he wrote, capitalism developed "as in a greenhouse"; here, he saw the first fully realized bourgeois country, which conditioned its people to the idea that "work is the key to wealth, and wealth the only object of work."

Yet what was most remarkable to Marx was that even though the United States had become one of three industrial giants in the world, it had not yet developed fixed class distinctions. In Marx's view, this was largely because the United States lacked a feudal past — as well as the pathologies that accompanied it.

To Marx's critics, America has often served as proof that his theory of capitalism does not stand up to the weight of evidence. How can one look at American history and find confirmation of Marx's theory that everyone in a capitalist society would become either a member of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat?

But his analysis in some ways prefigured what later came to be called "American exceptionalism." During the Cold War, liberals like Louis Hartz would make American exceptionalism central to their thinking. In his 1955 book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz contended that any analysis of American political thought had to begin with the "storybook truth about American history" — that the United States had no feudal past. According to Hartz, this "storybook truth" helped explain why the United States, unlike Europe, lacked "a genuine revolutionary tradition." The philosopher who embodied America was not Marx, but rather John Locke. This was one way to answer the question Werner Sombart famously asked in 1906: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?"

Marx had a different answer to this question — an answer that became the central theme of the final, crucial chapter of the first volume of *Capital*. Turning Alexis de Tocqueville's formulation on its head, Marx argued that Europe was America's future, not vice versa. American exceptionalism was a temporary condition. Unlike in Europe, there was not yet a surplus population. But with the onset of massive European migration — a persistent fact for much of Marx's life — the United States would soon gain its own surplus population.

Marx also predicted that another aspect of American exceptionalism — the frontier — would eventually wither. Anticipating Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis," Marx argued that European immigrants would no longer be welcomed with land, and more importantly, the autonomy that came with land ownership. This, he divined, would mark the death of the nineteenth-century American dream. New immigrants would be obligated to work for wages, thrown into the blossoming American proletariat.

With this, Marx negated the view of the United States as an exception to his rule — he negated the negation — and elevated the United States to the center of his famous dialectal mode of thought.

American Freedom

In his Civil War writings, Marx often painted himself as an ally of Lincoln, which is perhaps curious since the perception has long been that they were ideological opposites. Whereas Lincoln championed the free labor system under development across the North, Marx equated free labor with "wage slavery" because workers had no choice but to sell their labor to survive. But the perception of the two as opposites is a product of the Cold War: in reality, they had some important commonalities, especially their hatred for chattel slavery. And Marx, as we've seen, saw the attainment of free labor as a fundamental step toward workers' emancipation.

Socialist revolution didn't rise from the ashes of the Civil War. But we can still learn from Marx's ruminations on freedom — so informed by his observations of American slavery, so shaped by his analyses of the Civil War — as we think about it in our own time. Since Marx's day, one of the Left's primary missions — one of the reasons for its existence — has been to expand the idea of political freedom to include economic freedom. Without control over our work, our bodies, and our time, human potential is stunted and democracy is stillborn. "Freedom" remains a fixture in the American political lexicon. But we'd be better off looking to Marx for a definition.