



## From Class to Race and Back Again: A Critique of Charles Mills' Black Radical Liberalism

GREGORY SLACK\*

*ABSTRACT:* Charles Mills' philosophical position has undergone a number of subtle shifts over the past 30 years. Nevertheless, there has been a relative consistency in his thought over the past two decades, at least since *The Racial Contract* of 1997. That consistency consists in his turn towards social contract theory and its liberal values and away from Marxism with its focus on class and political economy. Mills notes that this turn does not constitute a "a complete repudiation of Marxism, since I do think that a modified historical materialism might be able to carry out an adequate conceptualization of the significance of race." Some of the claims Mills makes about Marx and Engels, however, should be challenged; they (or their views) are not as "white" as Mills attests. Indeed, Marx and Engels made a considerable start at theorizing white supremacy as an outgrowth of modern capitalism.

*KEYWORDS:* Marx, race, slavery, white supremacy, Charles Mills

### *Introduction*

CHARLES MILLS' PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION has undergone a number of subtle shifts over the past 30 years. As he himself said when confronted with just such a chronology by Shannon Sullivan: "The reader will, of course, appreciate that the great virtue of these constant shifts of philosophical position — apart from spurning the 'hobgoblin' of that small-minded 'foolish

\* I would like to thank Charles Mills for his detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and for his continued support and encouragement.

consistency’ so rightly sneered at by Emerson — is that it increases my chances of being right one day, if only as a matter of statistical probability” (Mills, 2017b, 41). There *has* been a relative consistency in his thought over the past two decades. However, at least since *The Racial Contract* of 1997, that consistency, I would argue — and I think Mills would agree — consists in his turn *towards* social contract theory and its liberal values and *away from* Marxism with its focus on class and political economy. Of course, Mills’ social contract theory and his liberalism are anything but unreconstructed. The whole point of *The Racial Contract* was to first apply the metaphor of the class/domination contract from Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in order to reveal the historical reality of a *racial* contract to subordinate non-whites on a global scale, and then to reintroduce the liberal social contract story of truly free and equal citizens coming together to forge a just society as a normative yardstick. The first move reveals the implicit and explicit racism that in fact underpinned the theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant (likewise revealing the evasiveness of Rawls on race), while the second move attempts to salvage their ideals — now augmented to genuinely include all human beings — and apply them as goals to guide our reconstruction of the now-revealed-to-be non-ideal and racist — White Supremacist — society we actually inhabit. Thus Mills has judged Sally Haslanger’s characterization of his theoretical mission in *The Racial Contract* to be “exactly” right: Mills “is offering a ‘picture’ or ‘iconography’ that when applied to the actual situation highlights its morally relevant features. . . . Its point is to illuminate the actual structure of society in such a way that our normative model can get a grip on it” (quoted in Pateman and Mills, 2007, 238). But a corollary of this theoretical stratagem has been for Mills, in favoring the “normative model” of liberalism, to sideline his former Marxism, mostly writing it off as a historical dead letter, but also sometimes admitting the relevance of aspects of the old Marxist paradigm.

Referring to the title of his 2003 volume *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*, Mills asserts: “The titular *From . . . to . . .* should not be taken in the spirit of a complete repudiation of Marxism, since I do think that a *modified* historical materialism might be able to carry out an adequate conceptualization of the significance of race. But the rethinking necessary would have to be more thorough than most white Marxists have so far been willing

to undertake” (2003, xvi–xvii). In this article I want to begin to take up that rethinking, but by going *back* to the founders of historical materialism and Marxism themselves, namely Marx and Engels. So I want to challenge some of the claims Mills makes about them in *The Racial Contract* and *From Class to Race*, in order to show that they (or their views) are not as “white” as Mills attests. Indeed, they made a considerable start at theorizing white supremacy as an outgrowth of modern capitalism.

Mills calls his current position, which he elaborates in his most recent book *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, “black radical liberalism.” Its three pillars are a reformed Kantian liberalism, the tradition of black radical thought exemplified by Du Bois, and Marxism (Mills, 2017a, 202–3). It is an interesting attempted synthesis, which of course I cannot discuss in full detail here, given space constraints. So I will focus on what he identifies as the Marxist component, fleshing out what he only gestures at as possibly fruitful lines of thought already present in the classic texts, while also raising the question of whether he might not be understating the tensions in the hoped-for synthesis, given the doubts many contemporary Marxists have raised about whether a “non-white-supremacist capitalism” is really possible. This paper is, then, a kind of “critique by way of a defense”: in deflecting Mills’ charges against Marx and Engels, I hope to take much of the anti-Marxist wind out of Mills’ liberal sails.

### *Denunciation and Condemnation*

In *The Racial Contract*, Mills had already begun to question whether Marx and Engels themselves were complicit with white supremacy. Much as the great “dead white male” philosophers, whatever their disagreements, agree that women are subordinate to men, so too “contractarians . . . and their theoretical adversaries” (Mills 1997, 94) can all agree on the necessity of the racial contract, *i.e.*, that white supremacy is to some extent justified:

So the Racial Contract is “orthogonal” to the varying directions of their thought, the common assumption they can all take for granted, no matter what their theoretical divergences on other questions. There is also the evidence of silence. Where is Grotius’ magisterial *On Natural Law and the Wrongness of the Conquest of the Indies*, Locke’s stirring *Letter Concerning the Treatment of the Indians*, Kant’s moving *On the Personhood of Negroes*, Mill’s famous

condemnatory *Implications of Utilitarianism for English Colonialism*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's outraged *Political Economy of Slavery*? Intellectuals write about what interests them, what they find important, and — especially if the writer is prolific — silence constitutes good prima facie evidence that the subject was not of particular interest. By their failure to denounce the great crimes inseparable from the European conquest, or by the halfheartedness of their condemnation, or by their actual endorsement of it in some cases, most of the leading European ethical theorists reveal their complicity in the Racial Contract. (Mills, 1997, 94.)

In a footnote to his imagined list of treatises, Mills qualifies his indictment of John Stuart Mill: “To be fair to Mill, he does have a famous exchange with Thomas Carlyle on the treatment of blacks in the British West Indies, in which he comes out for ‘progressive’ (relatively, of course) social policies. . . . But the difference is basically between less and more humane colonial policies; colonialism itself as a politico-economic system of exploitation is not being challenged” (153). I cite the footnote because it implies that of the thinkers on his list, Mills feels the need to qualify only John Stuart Mill's complicity with the racial contract. We will see later that Marx has some hard words of his own for Thomas Carlyle. But what about Marx's searing remarks in Volume I of *Capital* — the better part of chapter 31: “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist”? There he deals precisely not only with the political economy of slavery, but also with the mass slaughter and theft of indigenous populations, of artificial famines claiming millions of lives in colonial India, and in general the ruthless plunder and destruction by the European colonial powers in pursuit of “the making of profit as the ultimate and the sole purpose of mankind” (Marx, 1976, 918). Although Marx does not refer to European colonial powers specifically as “white,” he does refer to them collectively, on the one hand, as “the Christian colonial system” (916), and on the other hand to the “Christian character of primitive accumulation” of capital (917) which is distinguished by its utter brutality. As an example of the latter, Marx recounts how in pre-revolutionary 18th-century America, the Puritan settlers of New England first put bounties on “every Indian scalp and every captured redskin” (917), while

some decades later, the colonial system took its revenge on the descendants of the pious pilgrim fathers, who had grown seditious in the meantime. At English instigation, and for English money, they were tomahawked by the

redskins. The British Parliament proclaimed bloodhounds and scalping as “means that God and Nature had given into its hand.” (917.)

On the receiving end of this brutality, as Marx makes very clear, are indigenous Americans, Africans, the inhabitants of the East Indies colonies of Java, Celebes (now Sulawesi) and India, Mexico, and the West Indies colonies — precisely the non-white populations that are said to be the objects (rather than subjects) of the so-called racial contract, as Mills contends. And it is also very clear that Marx is doing the very opposite of applauding these horrors. Rather, with some of his most biting, acerbic sarcasm he denounces and condemns these monstrosities, explicitly agreeing with W. Howitt that “the barbarities and desperate outrages of the so-called Christian race, throughout every region of the world, and upon every people they have been able to subdue, are not to be paralleled by those of any other race, however fierce, however untaught, and however reckless of mercy and of shame, in any age of the earth” (quoted in Marx, 1976, 916). And in a footnote to this passage he also recommends “a good compilation on the treatment of slaves in Charles Comte, *Traité de législation*, 3rd edn, Brussels, 1837”; says Marx: “This stuff ought to be studied in detail, to see what the bourgeois makes of himself and of the worker when he can model the world according to his own image without any interference” (916n4). In other words, Marx is here encouraging something like the kind of work Mills does in *The Racial Contract* — unmasking the *true, real* self-conception and actions of the bourgeois class and its theorists as racist, ruthless, exclusionary and self-serving. Marx also indicates here that the category of “the worker” includes these exploited non-white populations, which lack the protection — or what is, for the capitalist class, mere “interference” — of legislation that would at least “veil” their slavery with the form of the wage-system.

### *German Ideology?*

Mills goes further in questioning the radical legacy of Marx and Engels in the chapter “European Specters” in *From Class to Race*. After correctly indicting “theories of liberalism — whether Lockean, Humean, Kantian, or Millian” as “put forward by thinkers who did *not* believe all people mattered equally” (2003, 150), Mills then attempts, much

in the manner he had done in *The Racial Contract*, to insert Marx and Engels into this list as well. He begins by reciting a supposedly Marxist mantra: “Marxists describe how bourgeois revolutions equalize normative standings but leave economic privilege intact. Formal equality has been achieved, in this society of ‘persons’ without formal differentiation; but another kind of revolution will be required to overcome the structures of economic disadvantage that make these persons actually radically unequal” (151). From this Mills concludes: “In this narrative, then, race does not officially exist” (151). He then cites some remarks from the beginning of *The German Ideology* about “men” as they actually are in the material production process, and claims:

The characterization offered implicitly makes it plain that Marx and Engels’ colorless, raceless, workers are actually *white*. Only for them have ascriptive hierarchy and caste distinction been abolished. The significance of the French Revolution is appreciated; the significance of the Haitian Revolution — and why there had to be a Haitian Revolution — is not. (151.)

Now, I am not going to try to defend the Marx and Engels of *The German Ideology* against the charge that they had in mind white Europeans when they spoke about workers. I think Mills may very well be right. But looking only at *The German Ideology* of 1845–6, when Marx and Engels were just beginning to mature philosophically, would be like pointing to an unpublished work that Immanuel Kant wrote when he was 26 and proclaiming that *this* was the *real* Kant, despite any later intellectual developments. Sixteen years later for instance, writing for the *Vienna Presse* in 1862, in the context of their analysis of the American Civil War and their hopes for the abolition of slavery, Marx and Engels applauded the fact that “the independence of the Negro republics of Liberia and Hayti [sic] has been recognized” (Marx and Engels, 1961, 201).

Ironically, although I do not want to claim that Marx and Engels fully appreciated “the significance of the Haitian Revolution — and why there had to be a Haitian Revolution” at the time of *The German Ideology*, it remains the case that it is the only work (that I can find, anyway) where they actually mention the Haitian Revolution. In the course of their seemingly endless polemic against Max Stirner, in a stretch where they appear to be railing against his subjective idealist treatment of the “freedom” of the slave and contrasting it with their hardnosed materialist understanding of the same, they say:

Thus, when he [the slave as Stirner imagines him — GS] lies trussed up in the *spanso bocko* torture of Surinam, unable to move hand or foot, or any other of his limbs, and has to put up with everything done to him, in such circumstances his power and peculiarity do not consist in his being able to make use of his limbs, but in the fact that they are *his* limbs. Here once again he has saved his peculiarity by always considering himself as otherwise-determined — sometimes as mere consciousness, sometimes as an unconscious body. At any rate, Saint Sancho [one of their nicknames for Stirner — GS] “endures” his portion of blows with more dignity than actual slaves do. However often, in the interests of the slave-owners, missionaries may tell the slaves that they have to “endure” the blows “for their own good,” the slaves are not taken in by such twaddle. They do not coldly and timidly reflect that they would otherwise “incur something worse,” nor do they imagine that they “deceive the slave-owner by an appearance of patience.” On the contrary, they scoff at their torturers, they jeer at the latter’s impotence even to force them to humble themselves, and they suppress every “groan” and every sigh, as long as the physical pain permits them to do so. (See Charles Comte, *Traité de Legislation*.) They are therefore, neither “inwardly” nor “outwardly” their own “owners,” but only the “owners” of their defiance, which could equally well be expressed by saying that they are neither “inwardly” nor “outwardly” “free,” but are free only in one respect, namely that they are “inwardly” free from self-humiliation as they also show “outwardly.” . . . it follows that [Stirner] imagines that the insurgent Negroes of Haiti and the fugitive Negroes of all the colonies wanted to free not *themselves*, but “man.” (Marx and Engels, 1976, 308–9.)

We can conclude from this passage, then, that Marx and Engels were already reading Comte’s *Traité de Legislation* of 1837 that Marx would later allude to in *Capital* as containing “a good compilation on the treatment of slaves.” They are thus aware that slaves are tortured and debased in the West Indies colonies of Surinam and Haiti, and say as much. Stirner is being mocked for his naive idealism regarding inner, conscious freedom, and the proud slaves are being commended for their physical defiance in the face of brutal torture. Furthermore, Marx and Engels criticize the notion that the Haitian Revolution — and slaves’ self-emancipation generally — sprang from idealist conceits about “man” in the abstract. They seem to assert that these acts of freedom in fact spring from the simple human desire for self-determination when slaves find themselves unfree both physically and in their social relations.

A few years later, as part of a series of articles that would be published as *The Class Struggles in France*, Marx compared Toussaint

L'Ouverture to Napoleon I: "Bonaparte [Napoleon III] still hid his longing to signify Napoleon [I], for *Soulouque* did not yet play Toussaint L'Ouverture" (Marx, 1964, 74). Soulouque was a contemporary of Napoleon III who was President (1847) and shortly after Emperor (1849) of Haiti — Napoleon III followed a similar trajectory, becoming President (1848) and then Emperor (1852) of France. In a slightly later article from the same series, where Marx refers to Napoleon III *as* Soulouque, he says: "Louis Bonaparte [Napoleon III] himself was the shallow caricature of Napoleon [I]" (122). Later in the same article he calls Napoleon III the "French Soulouque" (126). In other words, as he would later put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "All facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice . . . the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. . . . the Nephew [Napoleon III] for the Uncle [Napoleon I]" (Marx, 1963, 15). It is a well-known fact that Marx had nothing but contempt for Napoleon III but admired Napoleon I as a world-historical figure imbued with tragic greatness. Thus, since he also seems to have held Soulouque in contempt, we can speculate that he regarded L'Ouverture in a manner analogous to his estimation of Napoleon I.

Despite all this, I agree with Mills about *The German Ideology*. For just compare the following two descriptions of the impact of colonialism on the development of the forces of production. The first is from *The German Ideology*, the second from the aforementioned Chapter 31 of *Capital* and published 20 years later:

Manufacture and the movement of production in general received an enormous impetus through the extension of intercourse which came with the discovery of America and the sea-route to the East Indies. The new products imported thence, particularly the masses of gold and silver which came into circulation, had totally changed the position of the classes towards one another, dealing a hard blow to feudal landed property and to the workers; the expeditions of adventurers, colonisation, and above all the extension of markets into a world market, which had now become possible and was daily becoming more and more a fact, called forth a new phase of historical development, into which in general we need not here enter further. Through the colonisation of the newly discovered countries the commercial struggle of the nations against one another was given new fuel and accordingly greater extension and animosity. (Marx and Engels, 1976, 69.)



The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes gigantic dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the shape of the Opium Wars against China, etc. (Marx, 1976, 915.)

The two paragraphs have almost the same structure, but after 20 years of intense study of global economic history, Marx's manner of speaking has changed considerably. "The discovery of America and the sea-route to the East Indies" and the *absence* of any mention of either indigenous peoples or the African slave trade has become: "The discovery of gold and silver *in* America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins." An impartial, disinterested tone has become full of indignant fury as the victims of this development come into focus. As Engels said in his foreword to *Ludwig Feuerbach* in 1888 another 20 years later, when he had "once again ferreted out and looked over the old manuscript of 1845–46" of *The German Ideology*: "The completed portion [of the incomplete section on Feuerbach from which the above quote is taken] consists of an exposition of the materialist conception of history which proves only how incomplete our knowledge of economic history was at that time" (1941, 8).

It could be said that after *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels went back, time and again, to some programmatic words they had written there to guide them in their further historico-economic studies:

Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins real, positive science, the expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of the development of men. Empty phrases about consciousness end, and real knowledge has to take their place. When the reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions

which are derived from the observation of the historical development of men. These abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means offer a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, the difficulties begin only when one sets about the examination and arrangement of the material — whether of a past epoch or of the present — and its actual presentation. The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which certainly cannot be stated here, but which only the study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch will make evident. (Marx and Engels, 1976, 37.)

From the comparison of the two similarly structured and yet vastly different passages above, separated by 20 years of research, we can see that Marx heeded his own warning that

these abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means offer a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history.

So, while Mills might characterize Marx and Engels' mature view as one where the epochs of history are "neatly trimmed" according to prefabricated philosophical abstractions that pay no heed to the realities of racial domination, an examination of the mature primary texts tells a different story. It is simply not true that for the mature Marx and Engels, "bourgeois revolutions equalize normative standings but leave economic privilege intact. Formal equality has been achieved, in this society of 'persons' without formal differentiation."

However, Mills (2003) in "European Specters" also takes aim at Marx and Engels' alleged Eurocentrism, as well as racist jokes they made in connection with the ancestry of Paul Lafargue — fellow revolutionary socialist, Marx's son-in-law, and close family friend — in some of their correspondence in the 1880s. For lack of space I cannot fully address these concerns here, but it is worth noting that Kevin B. Anderson as well as the African American Marxist political scientist August Nimtz have written convincingly in defense of Marx and Engels on these matters.<sup>1</sup> In Nimtz's (2002) "The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and Other

1 See, for instance, Anderson, 2010; 2017; Nimtz, 2002; 2003; and Musto, 2013.

Related Myths,” he demonstrates that although Marx and Engels may have applauded, for instance, the American annexation of Mexico in their *German Ideology* period, they later reversed themselves on this and a host of other geopolitical issues, becoming more recognizably leftist and progressive by our own contemporary standards.<sup>2</sup> Nimtz (2003) stresses that Marx and Engels’ “comments in personal correspondence that were unambiguously racist . . . must be seen in context and in relation to their entire corpus of writings and actions,” cautioning us not to “rush to judgment based on the vapid criteria of ‘political correctness’” (132). His 2003 book as a whole provides that overarching context, while in a section entitled “Marx on Race” he specifically discusses Marx’s relationship with Lafargue (2003, 158–161).

### *The Political Economy of Slavery*

The later, more sophisticated Marxist story is still one of historical epochs — after all, the whole point of historical materialism is that “the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history” (Marx, 1976, 92) — but just as the boundaries that mark the transitions between natural history’s epochs are rough-hewn, so too are the boundaries and peculiarities of the different economic formations of society, which can only be revealed by a potentially endless examination of the historical details themselves. If Marx had been content with mere philosophical abstraction from the real vicissitudes of historical development, as Mills thinks, he would not have continually cast his theoretical net wider and wider in tandem with his deepening understanding of global economic history.

It is true that in the preface to the first edition of his magnum opus *Capital* Marx says:

What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and the forms of intercourse that correspond to it. Until now, their *locus classicus* has been England. This is the reason why England is used as the main illustration of the theoretical developments I make. (1976, 90.)

2 Also see Marx’s condemnation of the debt peonage introduced by U. S. slaveholders in the annexed Mexican territories before the Civil War as a form of slavery (Marx, 1976, 271–2, n3, and 400, n19). Below I address Mills’ evidence that Engels was still plagued by Eurocentrism in the 1880s.

And I think we can safely add that the other reason England is used as an example is because it is where Marx lived and had access to a wealth of resources on English economic history in the British Museum. Nevertheless, a number of times in this very same work Marx points out the global interconnections of the capitalist system that link England's economic development — and the development of capitalism generally — to the horrors of the slave economies in America and the colonies:

As soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, the *corvée*, etc. are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, whereby the sale of their products for export develops into their principal interest, the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom, etc. Hence the Negro labour in the southern states of the American Union preserved a moderately patriarchal character as long as production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements. But in proportion as the export of cotton became of vital interest to those states, the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products, but rather of the production of surplus-value itself. (345.)

“Civilized” is being used ironically here — the difference between civilization and barbarism is the difference between the over-worked “free” labor and barbaric slave labor.

Later in the same chapter, in a discussion of how capitalism's tendency to create an overpopulated reserve army of labor enables the capitalist class to burn through labor as fast as they can by extending the working day without end, Marx compares slave and free labor. Drawing on the work of the classical political economist J. E. Cairnes, from his recently published book *The Slave Power* of 1862, Marx quotes Cairnes at length to make his point:

The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses a piece of capital, which he must replace by fresh expenditure on the slave-market. But take note of this [quoting Cairnes]: “The rice-grounds of Georgia, or the swamps of the Mississippi, may be fatally injurious to the human constitution; but the waste of human life which the cultivation of these districts necessitates, is not so great that it cannot

be repaired from the teeming preserves of Virginia and Kentucky. Considerations of economy, moreover, which, under a natural system [which Marx characterizes as having “a moderately patriarchal character” in the passage above], afford some security for humane treatment by identifying the master’s interest with the slave’s preservation, when once trading in slaves is practiced, become reasons for racking to the uttermost the toil of the slave; for, when his place can at once be supplied from foreign preserves, the duration of his life becomes a matter of less moment than its productiveness while it lasts. It is accordingly a maxim of slave management, in slave-importing countries, that the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth. It is in tropical culture, where annual profits often equal the whole capital of plantations, that negro life is most recklessly sacrificed. It is the agriculture of the West Indies, which has been for centuries prolific of fabulous wealth, that has engulfed millions of the African race. It is in Cuba, at this day, whose revenues are reckoned by millions, and whose planters are princes, that we see in the servile class, the coarsest fare, the most exhausting and unremitting toil, and even the absolute destruction of a portion of its numbers every year.” (1976, 377.)

And Marx continues:

*Mutato nomine de te fabula narrator* [‘The name is changed, but the tale is told of you!’ from Horace’s *Satires*]. For slave trade, read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland and Wales, for Africa, Germany. We have heard how over-work has thinned the ranks of the bakers in London. Nevertheless, the London labour-market is always over-stocked with German and other candidates for death in the bakeries. Pottery, as we saw, is one of the branches of industry with the lowest life-expectancy. Does this lead to any shortage of potters? (378.)

Marx is here making a comparison between capitalist slave labor and capitalist wage labor, but while he is playing up their similarities, we know from the earlier passage that he has *not* forgotten their differences, since there he contrasted the “civilized horrors of over-work” with “the barbaric horrors of slavery,” which nonetheless become tragically combined in the capitalist slave economies, as he has Cairnes explain.

Further elucidating “the political economy of slavery,” Marx later explains the entanglement of racial slavery and capitalism, comparing it with the evolution of “free” labor in England and Ireland:

There can be no doubt that the rapid advance of cotton spinning not only promoted as if in a hot house the growing of cotton in the United States, and with it the African slave trade, but also made slave-breeding the chief business of the so-called border slave states. In 1790, when the first census of slaves was taken in the United States, their number was 697,000; in 1861 it had nearly reached four millions. On the other hand, it is no less certain that the blossoming of the English woollen factories, together with the progressive transformation of arable land into sheep pasture, brought about the conversion of agricultural labourers into "supernumeraries" and drove them in their masses from the land. Ireland, having during the last twenty years reduced its population by nearly one-half, is at this moment undergoing the process of still further reducing the number of its inhabitants to a level which will correspond exactly with the requirements of its landlords and the English woollen manufacturers. (1976, 571-2.)

And in a similar feat of simultaneous and striking contrasts and affinities, Marx asserts later on:

While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England, in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal. (925.)

Here in one fell swoop Marx unites wage-laborers and slaves, making them part of the same international producing class, while at the same time recognizing their essential difference, the difference between veiled and unqualified slavery.

Having demonstrated that racial slavery expanded exponentially and thus grew more brutal in proportion to its use in the production of commodities for export on the world market, Marx goes a step further and hypothesizes that it was the recalcitrance of conditions in North America and the West Indies to the primitive accumulation of capital — because, given the immense amount of unsettled arable land, imported labor from the mother country would sooner run away and become small proprietors of their own than become the wage-slaves of big farmers — that generates the need and desire for slavery there in the first place. Quoting and emending E. G. Wakefield from his *England and America* of 1833 as he goes, Marx explains:

. . . the drive to self-expropriation for the glory of capital exists so little in the case of working humanity, that slavery, according to Wakefield himself, is the sole natural basis of colonial wealth. . . . [Quoting Wakefield:] “The first Spanish settlers in Saint Domingo did not obtain labourers from Spain. But, without labourers” (*i.e.*, without slavery) “their capital must have perished, or, at least, must soon have been diminished to that small amount which each individual could employ with his own hands. . . .” We have seen that the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production. The essence of a free colony, on the contrary, consists in this, that the bulk of the soil is still public property, and every settler on it can therefore turn part of it into his private property and his individual means of production, without preventing later settlers from performing the same operation. This is the secret both of the prosperity of the colonies and their cancerous affliction — their resistance to the establishment of capital. (1976, 934.)

Thus, Marx concludes, again quoting Wakefield:

“No part of the population of America is exclusively agricultural, excepting slaves and their employers who combine capital and labour in particular works. Free Americans, who cultivate the soil, follow many other occupations. Some portion of the furniture and tools which they use is commonly made by themselves. They frequently build their own houses, and carry to market, at whatever distance, the produce of their own industry. They are spinners and weavers, they make soap and candles, as well as, in many cases, shoes and clothes for their own use. In America the cultivation of land is often the secondary pursuit of a blacksmith, a miller or a shop-keeper.” (935.)

In other words, “Free Americans” are petty bourgeois small proprietors who possess only as much capital as they need to get by, while only slaves serve as labor for capitalists engaged in the production of surplus value and thus the accumulation of capital.

Sometimes Marx uses the similarity, and other times the essential difference, between these two different types of labor — or slavery, veiled and unqualified — to demolish the hypocrisy of apologists for different factions of the capitalist class. For instance, in highlighting their similarity as equally part of the cost of the capital outlay of the capitalist in order to denounce the starvation wages “free” workers received, Marx sneers:

The *Morning Star*, a London free-trade organ which is so naïve as to be positively foolish, protested again and again during the American Civil War, with all the moral indignation of which man is capable, that the Negroes in the “Confederate States” worked absolutely for nothing. It should have compared the daily cost of a Negro in the southern states with that of a free worker in the East End of London. (1976, 680, n8.)

And in the same manner Marx recoils with sarcastic disgust at *The Times* and Thomas Carlyle, who try to defend the slave-owners by downplaying the barbarism of slavery:

*The Times* . . . defend[ed] the American slave-owners . . . [in] a leading article of 2 July 1863, “. . . we have scarcely a right to hound on fire and slaughter against families who were born slave-owners, and who, at least, feed their slaves well, and work them lightly.” . . . [Thomas Carlyle] reduces . . . the American Civil War, to this level, that the Peter of the North hires his labour by the day, and the Paul of the South hires his “for life.” (365–6, n58.)

In another viciously sarcastic turn of the screw, Marx remarks: “The fact that baking, shoemaking, etc. are only just being put on a *capitalist* basis in England is entirely due to the circumstance that English capital cherished feudal preconceptions of ‘respectability.’ It was ‘respectable’ to sell Negroes into slavery, but it was not respectable to make sausages, boots, or bread” (1014, n23).

### *The One Great Event of Contemporary History*

To return to Mills’ critique of Marx and Engels’ philosophy of workers’ revolution as “plainly” “white” — after all we have seen in *Capital*, is Mills really justified in claiming the following?

If we were to give Marx and Engels the benefit of the doubt, it is clear, then, that at best there was no perception on their part that the peculiar situation of people of color required any conceptual modifications of their theory. And if we are less charitable, we must ask whether their contemptuous attitude toward people of color does not raise the question of whether they too, like the leading liberal theorists cited above, should not be indicted for racism and the consignment of nonwhites, particularly blacks, to a different theoretical category. (2003, 151.)



Perhaps Mills would retort that although Marx denounced the barbaric horrors of racial slavery he nonetheless thought that blacks (“Negroes”) were somehow sub- or less than human, and thus more suited to slavery than whites. Or that for all of racial slavery’s horrors, what really mattered was the revolution of white workers against white capitalists, so that black slavery could be left in place after a white revolution, only now being managed by a free association of white producers.

In fact, in *Capital* we find the very opposite of such sentiments. Marx analogizes black slavery to capitalist production itself, as a transient socio-historical formation with nothing “natural” about it. In a footnote he refers back to an insight he had almost 20 years earlier, in an 1849 article for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*:

A negro is a negro. In certain relations he becomes a slave. A mule is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain relations does it become capital. Outside these circumstances, it is no more capital than gold is intrinsically money, or sugar is the price of sugar. . . . Capital is a social relation of production. It is a historical relation of production. (1976, 932, n4.)

In other words, black people are not “by nature” slaves, but rather are made into slaves by the role they are forced to play in the social relations of production of a given society. Not only this, but when Marx is discussing “one of the circumstances which make production based on slavery more expensive” — namely, that slaves treat means of production much more roughly than free workers and thus use them less efficiently, resulting in slave-owners “employing only the rudest and heaviest implements, which are difficult to damage owing to their clumsiness” — he does not attribute this state of affairs to slaves’ stupidity or sub-human quality. In discussing this aspect of “the political economy of slavery” he draws both on Cairnes’ *The Slave Power* of 1862 and F. L. Olmstead’s *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* of 1856, but he adds his own humanistic psychological explanation for the slave’s poor treatment of means of production:

Under slavery, according to the striking expression employed in antiquity, the worker is distinguishable only as *instrumentum vocale* [speaking implement] from an animal, which is *instrumentum semi-vocale* [semi-mute implement], and from a lifeless implement, which is *instrumentum mutum* [mute

implement]. But he himself takes care to let both beast and implement feel that he is none of them, but rather a human being. He gives himself the satisfaction of knowing that he is different by treating the one with brutality and damaging the other *con amore*. (303–4, n18.)

This treatment by Marx of the black slave's humanity makes it very plain: the black slave is a "worker" and a "human being."

Later, in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx attacks those who justify racial slavery by appeal to the necessity for slaves' work to be managed and supervised as confusing what is the result of enforced social relations for what is natural: the "work of management and supervision . . . arises rather from the *opposition* between the owner of the means of production and the owner of mere labour-power. . . . this function arising from the *servitude* of the direct producer is made often enough into a justification of that relationship itself" (1981, 509; emphases added). He mockingly quotes "the lawyer O'Connor, [who] at a meeting in New York on 19 December 1859, under the slogan 'Justice for the South'" (509) claimed that "it is not injustice to leave the Negro in the condition in which Nature placed him, to give him a master to govern him" (510).

What about the worry that Marx and Engels were really only concerned with the emancipation of the white workers, so that there could be a racial socialism or communism?

Apart from the fact that Marx and Engels always stressed that the final abolition of capitalism and the creation of communism could only be accomplished on a global scale, in Volume I of *Capital* in 1867 Marx made it very clear how important he thought the abolition of black slavery was to the triumph of the international working class. In the preface to the first edition, writing in German for a German readership, Marx averred that: "Just as in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century the American Civil War did the same for the European working class" (1976, 91). But let there be no misunderstanding, so that Mills cannot here claim Marx and Engels believed that "bourgeois revolutions equalize normative standings but leave economic privilege intact. Formal equality has been achieved, in this society of 'persons' without formal differentiation." On the contrary, as Engels put it in *Anti-Dühring* 11 years later in 1878:

. . . in a system of independent states dealing with each other on an equal footing and at approximately the same degree of bourgeois development, it was a matter of course that the demand for equality should assume a general character reaching out beyond the individual state, that freedom and equality should be proclaimed *human rights*. And it is significant of the specifically bourgeois character of these human rights that the American Constitution, the first to recognize the rights of man, in the same breath confirmed the slavery of the coloured races in America: class privileges were proscribed, race privileges sanctified. (Engels, 1939, 116–7.)

So here we have the truth: if the American Revolution “sounded the tocsin” for the European middle class by proclaiming the triumph of an inherently racialized capitalism, whose racism was fused into its very DNA — *i.e.*, bourgeois Constitution *as* Racial Contract — then the American Civil War was a workers’ revolutionary war to abolish slavery and “sound the tocsin” for the abolition of capitalism and classes themselves.

Did Marx and Engels support the revolutionary action of the slaves, former slaves and free blacks themselves in this effort, or did they insist that all the fighting should be done by whites? In fact, in January of 1860, Marx wrote to Engels: “In my opinion, the biggest things that are happening in the world today are on the one hand the movement of the slaves in America started by the death of John Brown, and on the other the movement of the serfs in Russia” (Marx and Engels, 1961, 221). Two years later, like Frederick Douglass, he supported the creation of black regiments in the Union army (253).

This is what Marx and Engels hoped the Civil War would be. Always the optimist when it came to anticipating the imminent demise of capitalism, Marx wrote in the same preface that the “Vice President of the United States has declared in public meetings that, after the abolition of slavery, a radical transformation in the existing relations of capital and landed property is on the agenda” (although he qualified his optimism, saying that these “signs of the times . . . do not signify that tomorrow a miracle will occur”) (1976, 93). Thus the American Civil War was “the one great event of contemporary history” (366, n58):

In the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. *Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.* 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. . . . At the same time (the beginning of September 1866), the Congress of the International Working Men's Association, held at Geneva, passed the following resolution ["drafted by Marx himself" — ed. of *Capital*], proposed by the London General Council: "We declare that the limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive. . . . the Congress proposes eight hours as the legal limit of the working day. (414–5; emphasis added.)

Of course, the Civil War in America did not abolish race privileges, as Marx and Engels hoped it would. Already in their correspondence of 1865, regarding the outcome of the War, Marx and Engels spoke of their dislike for the evolving policies of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson. In response to Marx's worries, Engels wrote:

I, too, like Mr. Johnson's policy less and less. His hatred of Negroes comes out more and more violently, while as against the old lords of the South he lets all power go out of his hands. If things go on like this, in six months all the old villains of secession will be sitting in Congress at Washington. *Without colored suffrage nothing whatever can be done there*, and J[ohnson] leaves it to the vanquished, the ex-slaveholders, to decide upon this matter. It is too absurd. (Marx and Engels, 1961, 276–7; emphasis added.)

Marx too recognized these tendencies, and thus that the potentially united American working class was still tragically divided along racial lines. Just three years after the hopeful pronouncements in *Capital*, in a letter of 1870 from Marx in London to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt in New York, Marx compared the enmity between Irish and English workers to that between the "poor whites" and "Negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A.":

And most important of all! Every industrial and commercial centre 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 U.S.A. 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 organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this. (Marx and Engels, 1975, 222.)

How true Marx’s words still ring today! If, in keeping with Marx’s assertion that the two sets of relations between workers are “much the same,” so that “English workers” and “Irish workers” are read as “poor white workers” and “black workers,” then we see that if Marx were alive today he would readily agree with Mills that race is, in a sense, “the Primary Contradiction” (at least in America): “Race as the central identity around which people close ranks. . . . Race as the stable reference point for identifying the ‘them’ and ‘us’ which override all other ‘thems’ and ‘us’s’. . . . Race as the best predictor of opinion on a myriad public issues. Race as what ties the system together, and blocks progressive change” (2003, 157). Mills’ last sentence, especially, could almost be lifted verbatim from Marx’s letter, if Mills had meant “capitalist system” by “system” and Marx had written “American” for “English.” Combined, they would read: “Race is what ties the capitalist system together, and blocks progressive change. *This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the American 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 had concluded from his study of “the Irish question . . . that the decisive blow against the English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers’ movement all over the world) cannot be delivered *in England but only in Ireland*” (221). He championed the cause of the Irish, who were seen by the English and Americans as “less white” or even “non-white” (Mills, 1997, 78–80).

Marx today would, then, presumably demand that the second-class-citizen status afflicting most blacks (see Alexander, 2012) be abolished forthwith as part of the long march to smash the rule of the capitalist class, just as he once insisted that “*Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.*” Thus, we can see as clear as day that Mills’ interpretations of Marx and Engels’

theoretical position regarding people of color — charitable and less charitable — is off-target.

*Primus Inter Pares*

Finally, there is Mills' charge of a persisting Eurocentrism in the works of the founders of Marxism, in part bolstered by his idiosyncratic reading of Engels' comments to Kautsky in a September 1882 letter, where Engels is replying to Kautsky's query: "What [do] the English workers think of colonial policy"? Engels' answer to this question begins and ends in a single paragraph, but Mills' omissions from the answer in the way he quotes the passage in "European Specters" are telling. Before I get to the passage in question, however, it is worth quoting some words of Engels to Kautsky from another letter earlier (February) in the same year. There he declares:

Generally speaking an international movement of the proletariat is possible only as between independent nations. What little republican internationalism there was in the years 1830–48 was grouped round the France that was to liberate Europe, and *French chauvinism* was thus *raised* to such a pitch that we are still hampered at every turn by France's mission as universal liberator and hence by its natural right to take the lead. . . . In the International [Working Men's Association], too, the French not unnaturally took this view. They, and many others, had first to learn from events, and must still do so daily, that international co-operation is possible only among *equals*, and even a *primus inter pares* [first among equals] at most for immediate action. (Marx and Engels, 1992, 191–2.)

Thus Engels makes it clear that one nation can lead others in the struggle for world Communism only as a "first among equals" and "at most for immediate action." France's chauvinism in thinking it ought to be the perennial leader of revolution is unequivocally rebuked. It is in this context that Engels' response to Kautsky's question should be understood.

Now here is Engels' answer (the passages Mills omits from his own quotation of the paragraph are italicized):

*You ask me what the English workers think of colonial policy. Well, exactly what they think of any policy — the same as what the middle classes think. There is, after all, no labour party here, only conservatives and liberal radicals, and the workers cheerfully go*

*snacks* [share profits or returns — GS] *in England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies.* As I see it, the actual colonies, *i.e.*, the countries occupied by European settlers, such as Canada, the Cape, Australia, will all become independent; on the other hand, countries that are merely ruled and are inhabited by natives, such as India, Algeria and the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions, will have to be temporarily taken over by the proletariat and guided as rapidly as possible towards independence. How this process will develop is difficult to say. India may, indeed very probably will, start a revolution and, since a proletariat that is effecting its own emancipation cannot wage a colonial war, it would have to be given its head, which would obviously entail a great deal of destruction, but after all that sort of thing is inseparable from any revolution. *The same thing could also happen elsewhere, say in Algeria or Egypt, and would certainly suit us best. We shall have enough on our hands at home.* Once Europe has been reorganised, and North America, the resulting power will be so colossal and the example set will be such that the semi-civilised countries will follow suit quite of their own accord; *their economic needs alone will see to that.* What social and political phases those countries will then have to traverse before they likewise acquire a socialist organisation is something about which I do not believe we can profitably speculate at present. *Only one thing is certain, namely that a victorious proletariat cannot forcibly confer any boon whatever on another country without undermining its own victory in the process. Which does not, of course, in any way preclude defensive wars of various kinds.* (Marx and Engels, 1992, 322–3.)

Of his altered version of Engels' answer, Mills claims:

The set of contrasts in this passage speaks volumes: on the one hand, the “civilized” white settler states; on the other hand, the “semi-civilized” countries that are inhabited by natives. The former are already fit for independence; the latter are not, and ideally they should be guided to independence (“when they become ready” — a familiar colonial trope) by a “proletariat” whose color is not indicated but, by the logic of the passage, are clearly the *white* European working class. “A colonial war” is ambiguous: Surely Engels couldn't possibly mean a war of counterinsurgency *against* Indian independence? (That would be a remarkable interpretation of proletarian internationalism!) But even on the more charitable reading, it is obvious that Europeans must be in charge to make sure things go right. (2003, 153.)

With the omitted passages restored we can swiftly dispatch Mills' many unsavory insinuations. I'll deal with them in the order he presents them.

First, it is clear Engels is using “semi-civilized” in the sense of “underdeveloped.” *I.e.*, European rule over the native populations in these

colonies has kept them deliberately underdeveloped economically — hence Engels' mention of "England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies" and his conviction that the "semi-civilized countries will follow suit quite of their own accord; their economic needs alone will see to that." Once independent, they will follow any victorious socialist states in modernizing their economies "quite of their own accord." Second, it is not that the semi-civilized nations are not fit for independence while the civilized are, but that they might need the help of their international proletarian comrades in defeating their European colonial rulers. This, I imagine, is an example of what Engels meant by "a first among equals" for "immediate action." Hence Engels' remark that an Indian revolution without international proletarian help "would obviously entail a great deal of destruction" — with their comrades' help, the Indians would handily defeat the European rulers and avoid "a great deal of destruction." But, in fact, even Mills' contention that Engels thought that "ideally [the semi-civilized nations] should be guided to independence" by "the *white* European working class" seems a patent falsehood. After predicting that the Indians will make a revolution for independence against their colonial masters on their own, Engels further says (in a passage Mills omits!) that: "the same thing could also happen elsewhere, say in Algeria or Egypt, and would certainly suit *us* best. We shall have enough on our hands at home." In other words, Engels is asserting just the *opposite* of what Mills alleges — "suit *us* best" means that "ideally" the semi-civilized nations ought to make their own revolutions for independence, simply because the English (or European) working class will be in the middle of trying to defeat the English (or European) capitalist class and so will be more than a little preoccupied. This already answers the supposed "ambiguity" of "a colonial war": neither Mills' overtly counterrevolutionary and pro-colonialist reading nor his "more charitable" Eurocentric reading are correct. Engels simply means that, since the English or European proletariat will be busy trying to win their own socialist revolution(s), they won't be available to help the Indian natives "wage a colonial war" against their European rulers/colonists. All this would almost be unnecessary to recount, if Mills had simply taken seriously Engels' closing remark: "Only one thing is certain, namely that a victorious proletariat cannot forcibly confer any boon whatever on another country without undermining its own victory in the process." They *can*, however, aid other nations in need of help, which is why "defensive wars" against



counterrevolutionary forces — European colonial rulers, for instance — are not ruled out. What could be clearer than that this sentiment is the very opposite of paternalistic Eurocentric “whiteness”? And far from trumpeting the English working class as the advance guard of world revolution, Engels *begins* and thus *frames* his whole answer by lamenting their degeneration into something like a labor aristocracy who “cheerfully go snacks in England’s monopoly of the world market and the colonies.”

*All Human Beings Without Distinction of Sex or Race*

I rest my case, then, against Mills’ attempt to assimilate Marx and Engels to a philosophical tradition of complicity with White Supremacy. Mills’ conclusion, on the other hand, is the following:

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 arguably not intended by the founders to extend without qualification to this population in the first place. (2003, 153.)

I contend that the foregoing argument has revealed this closing judgment on Marx and Engels’ philosophical legacy to be largely groundless. As Marx put it in his Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers’ Party of 1880, “the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race” (Marx and Guesde, 2019). In the following two sections of the Programme, written with Jules Guesde and with assistance from Engels and Lafargue, they demand, *inter alia*, removal of “all the articles of the Code [Napoleon] establishing the inferiority of the worker in relation to the boss, and of woman in relation to man,” “Legal prohibition of bosses employing foreign workers at a wage less than that of French workers,” “Equal pay for equal work, for workers of both sexes,” and “Responsibility of society for the old and the disabled” (Marx and Guesde, 2019). In other words, they demanded the repeal of the class, racial, sexual and disability “contracts” and their replacement with a classless society, a free association of producers.

*Conclusion*

We have seen, then, that Marx in *Capital* was very much onto the insights regarding the entanglement of capitalism and racial slavery later developed by thinkers in the black radical tradition whom Mills cites in his most recent book, such as Eric Williams and Du Bois (2017a, 204). Marx's thoughts also prefigure the work of Sven Beckert, cited approvingly by Mills (204–5), who has recently argued for the essential connection between slave labor and the rise of capitalism and the cotton industry. Indeed, as early as 1847 in *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx noted that “direct slavery . . . Negro slavery in Surinam, in Brazil, in the Southern States of North America”

is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.

Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe North America off the map of the world, and you will have anarchy — the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations.

Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World. (Marx, 1992, 82.)

None of this is to say that the black radical tradition and critical race theory are somehow unnecessary or redundant, given Marx's work. After all, his insights needed to be developed and systemized further. It is simply to point out that Marx's work is not at all at odds with the black radical tradition's concerns regarding the importance of white supremacy in the making of the modern world. I would submit that Marx should be seen as one of the wellsprings of that tradition insofar as it is also anti-capitalist, and that he ought not to be lumped in with other race-ignorant “critical theorists” who failed to see and explore the fact that “unpaid black labor (and colonial exploitation more broadly) is a central foundation of the modern world” (Mills, 205). His position and insights are hardly exhausted by Mills' characterization

of him as a “materialist but class-reductionist [and racist] class theorist” (202).

My biggest worry, though, when it comes to Mills’ “black radical liberalism” is that, as a variety of liberalism it is not hostile enough to capitalism. Indeed, Mills contends that “it is possible to have a non-racial capitalism” and that “since we live in a post-Marxist world in which Marx’s vision seems increasingly unrealizable. . . . this conclusion is welcome because it implies that the struggle for racial justice need not be anti-capitalist” (2017a, 126). It might be true, as Mills contends, that Marxism has been traditionally weak on ethical/normative theory<sup>3</sup> and so needs to be supplemented by ideas from the liberal tradition (209), but surely not at the price of abandoning its revolutionary critique of capitalism?

Is it possible, in any meaningful sense, to have (or aim for) a non-racial capitalism?<sup>4</sup> The Marxist Mike Cole, in his exchange with Mills, admits that “it is possible, though extremely difficult because of the multiple benefits accruing to capital of racializing workers . . . to imagine a capitalist world of ‘racial’ equality” (2009, 256). Of course, as Cole intimates, being able to merely imagine such a possibility in theory does not translate into being able to actualize such a possibility in practice. Mills himself notes that given the historical entwinement of white supremacy and capitalism, “any political project attempting to separate the two” may be “a non-starter,” admitting this worry “as an important objection to the whole project” (2017a, 126) but not answering it.

*c/o Philosophy Department  
CUNY Graduate Center  
365 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
gslack@gradcenter.cuny.edu*

#### REFERENCES

- Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Anderson, Kevin B. 2010. *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> But see, for instance, Wills, 2011, and Thompson, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Recently Nancy Fraser (2018) has productively addressed this question. See also Taylor, 2016, especially the last chapter.

- . 2017. “Marx’s Intertwining of Race and Class During the Civil War in the United States.” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 17:1, 28–40.
- Cole, Mike. 2009. “Critical Race Theory Comes to the UK: A Marxist Response.” *Ethnicities*, 9:2, 246–284. doi: 10.1177/1468796809103462
- Engels, Frederick. 1939. *Anti-Dühring*. Translated by Emile Burns. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1941. *Ludwig Feuerbach*. New York: International Publishers.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2018. “Is Capitalism Necessarily Racist?” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 92, 21–42.
- Marx, Karl. 1963. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1964. *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume I. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.
- . 1981. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume III. Translated by David Fernbach. London: Penguin Books.
- . 1992. *The Poverty of Philosophy*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. 1961. *The Civil War in the United States*. 3rd Edition. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1975. *Selected Correspondence*. 3rd Edition. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- . 1976. *Collected Works*. Volume 5. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1992. *Collected Works*. Volume 46. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl, and Jules Guesde. 2019. “Programme of the French Worker’s Party.” Marxists Internet Archive. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm)
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- . 2003. *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2017a. *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2017b. “Intersectional Meditations: A Reply to Kathryn Gines and Shannon Sullivan.” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 5:1, 29–50.
- Musto, Marcello, ed. 2013. *Marx for Today*. New York: Routledge.
- Nimtz, August. 2002. “The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and Other Related Myths.” Pp. 65–80 in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2003. *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America: The “Absolute Democracy” or “Defiled Republic.”* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Pateman, Carole, and Charles W. Mills. 2007. *Contract and Domination*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahatta. 2016. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Thompson, Michael J., ed. 2015. *Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis*. Boston, Massachusetts: Brill.
- Wills, Vanessa. 2011. “Marx and Morality.” PhD dissertation. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh.