

Combatting White Nationalism: Lessons from Marx

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Abstract

This essay seeks to draw lessons from Karl Marx's writings and practice that can help combat Trumpism and other expressions of white nationalism. *The foremost lesson is that fighting white nationalism in the tradition of Marx entails the perspective of solidarizing with the "white working class" by decisively defeating Trumpism and other far-right forces. Their defeat will help liberate the "white working class" from the grip of reaction and thereby spur the independent emancipatory self-development of working people as a whole.*

The anti-neoliberal "left" claims that Trump's electoral victory was due to an uprising of the "white working class" against a rapacious neoliberalism that has caused its income to stagnate for decades. However, working-class income (measured reasonably) did not stagnate, nor is "economic distress" a source of Trump's surprisingly strong support from "working-class" whites. And by looking back at the presidential campaigns of George Wallace between 1964 and 1972, it becomes clear that Trumpism is a manifestation of a long-standing white nationalist strain in US politics, not a response to neoliberalism or globalization.

Marx differed from the anti-neoliberal "left" in that he sought to encourage the "independent movement of the workers" toward human emancipation, not further the political interests of "the left." Their different responses to white nationalism are rooted in this general difference. Detailed analysis of Marx's writings and activity around the US Civil War and the Irish independence struggle against England reveals that Marx stood for the defeat of the Confederacy, and the defeat of England, largely because he anticipated that these defeats would stimulate the independent emancipatory self-development of the working class.

Owing to their prejudiced, supremacist thinking and their privileged position relative to Irish immigrant workers, large numbers of English workers identified with "their" ruling classes and were hostile to the Irish. Marx argued that Irish independence was crucially important for the whole working class—including the English workers themselves. If England's effort to continue its rule over Ireland were defeated, this would strike a blow against the supremacist pretensions of the "ordinary English worker[s]," free them from identifying their interests with those of the English ruling classes, and put them on an independent, internationalist, and emancipatory path.

Similarly, owing to privileges and white supremacy, "poor whites" in the US tended to support or accept slavery. Marx regarded this as a "barrier to progress," including the progress of the poor whites themselves. He championed the defeat of the Confederacy and the emancipation of the slaves largely because he anticipated that these events would eliminate that barrier.

Introduction

In the UK, the surge of support for Brexit last year, which secured the victory of the “Leave” forces, was driven largely by anti-immigrant backlash. In France, neo-fascist Marine Le Pen won more than a third of the vote in this year’s presidential election. Most ominously, the virulently racist and xenophobic Donald Trump is now US president, and he enjoys the firm support of avowed white supremacists. This nexus has given rise to a shocking increase in far-right violence, up to and including the recent murder in Charlottesville of anti-fascist protester Heather Heyer by a neo-Nazi.

Clearly, we must combat this resurgence of white nationalism.¹ And we have to understand how to do so, *and how not to do so*. For Marxist-Humanists, the goal remains, as always, complete human freedom: the free development of each human being as the condition for the free development of all. What kind of responses to the threat of white nationalism help us to move closer to the realization of this goal, and what kinds do not?

To aid us in working out an answer to that question, this essay will examine Karl Marx’s writings and praxis and seek to draw some lessons from them. In his day, Marx likewise had to confront white nationalism, and he developed some ideas about why it exists and how to overcome it. Specifically, I will examine some of Marx’s writings and activity around the US Civil War and around the struggle for Irish independence from England. Although these were quite different events, Marx regarded the problem of white nationalism in the US and anti-Irish prejudice in England as essentially the same thing: “The ordinary English worker ... 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.”²

Before we can turn to Marx’s writings on these questions, however, we need nail down the point that Trumpism really is an expression of an extremely entrenched and long-standing white-nationalist strain in US politics. If that were not the case, what good would it do to re-examine how Marx confronted the threat of white nationalism and try to draw lessons from his thinking and activity? Thus, we first have to expose the factual flaws in the narrative, which is quite popular in anti-neoliberal “left”³ circles and among “populist” liberals, that Trumpism actually is, and/or that Trump actually won the 2016 election because of, an uprising of the “white

¹ I am using the term *white nationalist* to refer to the ideology of people like Trump, Steve Bannon, and Pat Buchanan, and not only neo-Nazis and members of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. In an [important recent essay](#), Ta-Nehisi Coates calls Trump “the first white president” and writes that “his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power.”

² April 9, 1870 letter to Sigrid Meyer and August Vogt.

³ By anti-neoliberal “left,” I do not mean those opposed to neoliberalism—which no one on the left supports—but tendencies that oppose neoliberalism *while shirking from opposition to capitalism in all of its forms*, especially tendencies that seek to make common cause with the far right, celebrate the rising popularity of reactionary alternatives to neoliberalism as a progressive blow struck by the working class, and/or regard neoliberalism as the *main* enemy.

working class” against a rapacious neoliberalism that has caused its income to stagnate for decades.

Immediately after the election, that line of argument seemed almost ubiquitous, especially on the left. In the wake of the Charlottesville massacre, it seems a lot less plausible than it did before. But the real case against it rests on other facts: (1) The income of the working class did not stagnate. (2) “Economic distress” was not the reason why Trump garnered exceptionally strong support—for a Republican—from a segment of the so-called “white working class.” And most importantly, (3) an examination of the historical record shows that Trumpism is not a response to neoliberalism or economic distress; it is a pre-existing condition.

Trumpism: A Pre-Existing Condition

The Anti-Neoliberal “Left” Narrative

The anti-neoliberal “left” and “populist” liberals frequently tell a story about the 2016 US election that comforts them by blaming their neoliberal adversaries and holding out hope of their ultimate triumph: Trump’s victory was due to the forgotten “white working class,” which rose up against decades of neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization. For example, [Cornell West’s instant analysis](#) of the election was that

[t]he monumental election of Trump was a desperate and xenophobic cry of human hearts for a way out from under the devastation of a disintegrating neoliberal order

White working- and middle-class fellow citizens—out of anger and anguish – rejected the economic neglect of neoliberal policies and the self-righteous arrogance of elites.

[... There was an] abysmal failure of the Democratic [P]arty to speak to the arrested mobility and escalating poverty of working people

And in February, [Boris Kagarlitsky](#), an [apologist for Vladimir Putin’s regime](#) and self-described Marxist theoretician, opined:

The collapse of the neo-liberal world order is a spontaneous and natural process, generated by its own self-destructive logic The victory of Trump is itself a consequence of the crisis

No matter what the liberal pundits say, these were the votes of workers who brought him the victory. Not the so-called “white men”, but the working class, who openly and, largely, in solidarity, made a stand against the Washington establishment. ... This really was an uprising of the forgotten and resentful provincial America against the spoiled people in California and the [cosmopolitan](#) officials from Washington, who comfortably exploit cheap labor of illegal migrants

The crucial factoid regularly cited in support of what West calls “the arrested mobility and escalating poverty of working people” is the stagnation of middle-class incomes. For example, David Cay Johnston’s [instant election analysis](#) was that

Trump won because many millions of Americans, having endured decades of working more while getting deeper in debt, said “enough.”

From 1967, when Lyndon Johnson was president, to 2014, the average income of the vast majority of Americans rose by only \$328 to \$33,068. That’s just 1 percent above inflation after 47 years and this income stagnation applies, statistically, to the 90 percent, everyone who made less than \$121,000 in 2014.

Middle-Class Income Stagnation?

Johnston got his figures from Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez. For a long time, their work on income inequality was taken to be authoritative and incontrovertible in many circles. Under neoliberalism (i.e., since the early 1980s), they reported, middle-class income has stagnated in the US and there has been a massive and shocking growth of income inequality. However, in response to other researchers’ criticisms, they have recently abandoned the claim about stagnating income. In a paper written together with Gabriel Zucman last December, they conceded that

bottom 90% pre-tax income growth is significantly greater than that estimated using the Piketty and Saez (2003) data, according to which average bottom 90% incomes has declined since 1980 The real income figures from Piketty and Saez (2003) underestimate the growth of bottom 90% incomes and exaggerate the share of growth going to top groups.⁴

They went on to state that “[t]here are three reasons why middle-class growth has been stronger than in the Piketty and Saez (2003) series.” First, they had adjusted for inflation by using an (inconsistent) inflation index that exaggerated how much inflation had occurred, thereby underestimating “real” income growth. Second, they had looked at the income of “tax units” rather than individuals. Since the number of tax units has grown faster than the number of individuals (because of a declining marriage rate), their previous figures had diluted income growth per person. Finally, and most importantly, their previous work did not count tax-exempt income—such as employers’ contributions, on their employee’s behalf, to Social Security, Medicare, and private pension and medical-insurance plans—which has “grown significantly since 1980.”⁵

⁴ Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, “[Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States](#),” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 22945, Dec. 2016, p. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33. The statistics cited by Johnston are likewise seriously affected by their failure to count tax-exempt income.

Revised estimates in their December paper, which addressed these problems, tell a very different story. Middle-class income growth was substantial. Between 1982 and 2014, the real per-person after-tax income of the bottom 90% of the population increased by 45%. For the middle 40%, the increase was 53%, and even the income of the bottom half of the population rose by 31%.⁶

Piketty, Saez, and Zucman also found that, once tax-exempt income is counted, the share of national income that employees receive did not decline throughout the neoliberal period. Prior to the Great Recession, there was no decline at all.⁷ In recent years, employees' income share has declined (by a relatively small amount), but this decline was not caused by neoliberalism. It was caused by the recession and the economy's failure to rebound briskly from it.

This evidence lines up very well with what other researchers have found when they measure income using the methods that Piketty, Saez, and Zucman have recently taken on board. *It is crucial evidence that the anti-neoliberal "left" explanation for Trump's election is seriously flawed. If there was no stagnation of income caused by neoliberalism, globalization, or financialization, Trump's win simply cannot be attributed to a working-class revolt against such stagnation!*

Why Votes of Non-College Whites Flipped to Trump

Yet even were the story about stagnating middle-class income correct, the narrative propounded by the anti-neoliberal "left" runs into other serious problems. One is the fact that Trump's "base" has been sticking with him through thick and thin. [His approval rating](#) fell somewhat during the initial months of his presidency—apparently, some of the "reluctant" Trump voters became disenchanted—but it has remained steady during the last four months. This would not be happening if Trump's election had been a revolt against neoliberalism, and for populist economic policies. He has been president for eight months, and there is still no jobs program in sight. He repeatedly pushed hard for the passage of legislation to "repeal and replace" Obamacare that would have taken away medical insurance from more than 20 million people. And he has populated his administration with the super-rich, including Wall Streeters. So, if the support for Trump among his base had truly been rooted in economic distress and populist concerns, we should by now have seen the base flee from him in substantial numbers. That has not occurred.

Another serious problem with the anti-neoliberal "left" narrative is that a substantial and growing body of research indicates that its explanation for why Trump won the election is just not correct. It is true that he received a substantially larger share of the votes of whites without a college education—the so-called white "working class"—than previous Republican presidential candidates had received. This single fact is the statistical hook on which the anti-neoliberal "left" explanation for Trump's election hangs, but this fact means very little by itself.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix 2, Table C3b. For the 1967–2014 period to which Johnston referred, Piketty, Saez, and Zucman's figures indicate that, after inflation, the per-person income of the bottom 90% of the population rose by 60%. For the middle 40% of the population, the rise was 67%; for the bottom half, the rise was 47%.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42, Table 1 (top graph).

First of all, educational attainment is a rather imperfect proxy for social class as measured by income or occupation. Second, it is illegitimate to latch onto a fact about “working-class” whites voting for Trump and then “explain” the fact with a made-up story about this having been a working-class revolt against the economic distress imposed on it by neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization. That story is no more than one of a great many possible hypotheses about why the shift occurred. It should not be accepted as correct unless the preponderance of additional facts indicates that economic distress was the main cause of the shift.⁸

However, they indicate that it was not. The controlled studies that have been conducted indicate that, if economic distress had any effect at all, it made people more likely to vote for Trump’s main opponent. The shift to Trump instead seems to have been due to some combination of racism, sexism, discontent with cultural change, anti-immigrant sentiment, and authoritarianism.

- In a post-election analysis, FiveThirtyEight’s Nate Silver found that “[Education, Not Income, Predicted Who Would Vote For Trump](#).” There was a shift to Trump among whites without a college degree, but not because they tend to be lower-income. Once one controls for differences in education levels, “lower-income counties were no more likely to shift to Trump.” This fact alone strongly suggest that economic distress was not a driving force behind the shift to Trump.
- Similarly, [Stephen Clarke & Dan Tomlinson of the Resolution Foundation](#) found that, although it initially appears that the shift to Trump was determined in part by income level and residence in a manufacturing area, these economic variables cease to be statistically significant predictors of the shift to Trump once one controls for level of education. What determined county-level differences in the extent of the shift to Trump were differences in education level, race, national origin, and age, not differences in these economic variables.⁹
- [Jonathan Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell](#) of the Gallup organization analyzed a massive dataset on Trump’s favorability ratings between July 2015 and October 2016. They found that, after controlling for the influence of other variables, Trump was more popular among *more affluent* people—even if one looks only at non-Hispanic whites. In addition, “[h]is supporters are less likely to be unemployed and less likely to be employed part-time”; support for Trump is not substantially affected by one’s occupation; nor is it affected by being exposed to international-trade competition and job-competition with immigrants, which “make[s] it very unlikely that direct exposure to

⁸ Actually, even that would be insufficient. The facts would have to indicate that the revolt was against economic distress *caused by neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization*—which is highly unlikely, since these processes have been taking place for several decades, while the shift in the vote of non-college-educated whites was sudden. Why haven’t they been voting to topple the “neoliberal world order” all along?

⁹ They also found that county-level differences in labor-force participation had a statistically significant effect, but only in “battleground states,” and that recent changes in labor-force participation were not a statistically significant predictor of a shift in support for Trump.

harm from globalization could be a causal factor in motivating large numbers of Trump's supporters."

- Analyzing a post-election survey of more than 4000 people, [Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel](#) found that, after controlling for the influence of other relevant variables, there was "little evidence to suggest individual economic distress benefited Trump." Nor did "economic anxiety" influence the election choices of white voters. In contrast, "racial attitudes towards blacks and immigration are the key factors associated with support for Trump." Two of their three variables that measure different dimensions of "racial animus" are "significant predictors of Trump support among white respondents, independent of partisanship, ideology, education levels, and the other factors included in the model," and they have a quite sizable influence on Trump support as well.
- [Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones](#) analyzed attitudes to Trump among whites without college degrees. Their analysis was based on a large pre-election national survey and four post-election focus groups in Cincinnati. Contrary to the story that Trump's election was driven by "economic distress," they found that, once one controls for other relevant variables, "being in fair or poor financial shape actually predicted support for Hillary Clinton among white working-class Americans, rather than support for Donald Trump." Those who said that their financial situation was fair or poor were almost twice as likely as other respondents to support Hillary Clinton. The factors that actually stood out as predictors of Trump support were identification with the Republican Party, feeling that the American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence, feeling like a stranger in their own country, favoring the deportation of undocumented immigrants, and believing that "investment" in college education is a risky gamble.
- [Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew MacWilliams, and Tatishe Nteta](#) sought to explain why support for Trump was substantially stronger among whites without college degrees than it was among whites with such degrees. Analyzing results of a YouGov survey conducted shortly before the election, they found that

very little of this gap can be explained by the economic difficulties faced by less educated whites. Rather, most of the divide appears to be the result of racism and sexism in the electorate, especially among whites without college degrees. Sexism and racism were powerful forces in structuring the 2016 presidential vote, even after controlling for partisanship and ideology

as well as age, income, gender, and race (pp. 24–25). (Furthermore, their "economic dissatisfaction" variable was based on answers to the question, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your overall economic situation?," which is not really a measure of actual or even perceived economic well-being.¹⁰ It is arguable, especially in light of other research surveyed here, that the small portion of the gap in support for

¹⁰ Some people might say that they are dissatisfied because, even though they currently do not face serious economic problems, they wish that they were even better off or they are worried about the future.

Trump that they attribute to “economic difficulties” might actually be attributable to “economic anxiety” rather than objective economic problems.)

- Matthew MacWilliams conducted and analyzed two surveys. One was a [nationwide survey of 1800 Republican voters](#) conducted at the end of 2015. The other was a survey, conducted two months later, of [538 people likely to vote in South Carolina’s Republican primary](#). In both cases, he found that “education, income, gender, age, ideology and religiosity had no significant bearing on a Republican voter’s preferred candidate.” The only statistically-significant variables were authoritarianism and fear of terrorism.
- [Christopher Weber, Christopher Federico, and Stanley Feldman](#) came to a similar conclusion. They analyzed survey data on more than 4000 voters, collected after the November 2016 general election. After controlling for the influence of education, income, age, gender, and religiosity, they found that a voter who scored “high” on a scale of authoritarian attitudes had a 79% chance of having voted for Trump, while those who scored “low” had only a 30% chance of having done so. This 49-point gap is much greater than the 34-point gap between high- and low-authoritarians’ chances of having voted for Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican candidate for president, and almost double the 28-point gap between their chances of having voted for George W. Bush in 2000.

These studies do not add up to a single, unified explanation for why whites without college degrees were actually more likely to vote for Trump than for previous Republican presidential candidates. But the negative results are indeed univocal and unequivocal. Once the influence of other factors is controlled for, there is no evidence that the shift to Trump was a revolt of low-income voters or people exposed to competition from imports or immigrant workers.

Trumpism is Wallace-ism Redux

Yet the strongest evidence that Trump’s electoral victory was not an uprising of the forgotten working class against economic distress brought about by neoliberalism and globalization is the evidence that *Trumpism is a pre-existing condition*. It has unfortunately been with us all along, as the resurgence of atavistic and revanchist white supremacism helps to make clear.

An examination of presidential campaigns of George Corley Wallace, the long-time authoritarian, racist, right-wing governor of Alabama makes it far clearer. Wallace ran for president three consecutive times between 1964 and 1972. This was well *before* neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization came along and allegedly pummeled the working class. Yet the messages and authoritarianism of his campaigns are eerily similar to Trump’s, as is the strong support he garnered in the North as well as the South—particularly in the industrial Midwest where the flip to Trump occurred last year.

Wallace became governor of Alabama in January, 1963. In his inaugural address—which was written by Asa Carter, who had started a paramilitary Ku Klux Klan organization in the mid-1950s, and left it only after shooting two other members in a dispute over finances—Wallace famously promised to fight for “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

Five months later, he stood in the doorway of a University of Alabama auditorium to prevent enrollment of its first Black students. These two events were the first to bring him widespread recognition, and tons of fan mail, outside the South.

The following year, when President Lyndon B. Johnson was in the process of getting the Civil Rights Act passed by Congress, Wallace decided to oppose him in the race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Although Johnson's eventual nomination was assured, Wallace decided to run in select states outside the South—Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland—to demonstrate that his segregationist, “anti-elite,” and anti-Washington message was popular, not only in the South, but in the North as well.¹¹

Wallace did surprising well in all three states. Even though Johnson was an incumbent president, and very popular ([his approval rating](#) at the time was close to 75%), Wallace received 34% of the vote in Wisconsin, 30% in Indiana, and 43% in Maryland against “surrogate” candidates standing in for Johnson.

It is important to note that Wisconsin is one of the three states in the Democratic “firewall” that flipped to Trump in 2016. And it, as well as Indiana, are in the industrial Midwest—which globalization and neoliberalism had not yet turned into a “Rustbelt.”

Martin Luther King commented that the results in Maryland showed that “segregation is a national and not a sectional problem.” Wallace swept all eight counties on Maryland's rural Eastern Shore. It was estimated that more than 90% of white voters there cast their votes for him. (In 2016, Trump received 65% of the Republican primary votes on the Eastern Shore, compared to 54% statewide. In the November general election, his overall vote share in Maryland was only 35%, but he received 57% on the Eastern Shore.) Wallace voters in Glen Burnie, a suburb of Baltimore, “went to the polls with big grins on their faces,” according to a local newspaper editor. “I never saw anything like it. They were going to show Uncle Sam that they had had it.”¹²

They had had it *with what*, exactly? Globalization, neoliberalism, and financialization that would not arrive on the scene for another decade or more? This was the heyday of Keynesian “fine tuning” of the economy.

In 1968, Wallace ran for president in the general election as a third-party candidate, against Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, the vice-president. He received 14% of the vote, almost half of which came from outside the states that had been part of the Confederacy. Wallace might

¹¹ During the period in which Wallace ran for president, 1964–72, the major parties' nominating systems were very different from those in effect today. Party officials and elected delegates played a much larger role in choosing the nominee; there were relatively few primaries and caucuses in which voters (in effect) directly vote for presidential candidates. In 1964, there were only 17 primaries; in 1972, there were 22.

¹² Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2d ed. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), p. 215; Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 125.

have performed even better had Nixon not co-opted his “law and order” message and his claim to be the candidate of “forgotten Americans,” in what Wallace biographer Dan T. Carter has described as “a desperate, undignified game of political catch-up.”¹³

Wallace once again competed as a Democrat in the 1972 presidential primaries. The battle against *de jure* segregation had by this time been lost, and Wallace did not try to revive it, but instead ran as an implacable opponent of efforts to achieve the integration of public schools through “forced busing.” In terms of the popular vote, the primary contest was a tight, three-way race between Wallace, Humphrey, and George McGovern, who ultimately secured the nomination. Humphrey obtained 26% of the nationwide popular vote; McGovern received 25%; and Wallace received 23%.¹⁴

Wallace ran in 17 of the 22 primaries held that year. He won five of them, and came in second in six others. As might be expected, he did very well in the South, winning primaries in all three southern states that held primaries—Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee—and pulling down an absolute majority of votes in the latter two.

Yet Wallace also performed remarkably well outside the South. He won primaries in Michigan—where he again received an absolute majority—and Maryland. He came in second in Indiana, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.¹⁵

Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin are the three Democratic “firewall” states that flipped to Trump in 2016. And they, as well as Indiana and West Virginia, are part of the “Rustbelt.” This was 1972, however, before globalization and “neoliberalism”; the region was not yet a Rustbelt. Nonetheless, Wallace won a majority of votes in one of these five states and placed second in the other four.

Writing in 1996, Wallace biographer Dan T. Carter remarked that “Wallace, more than any other political figure of the 1960s and early 1970s, sensed the frustrations—the rage—of many American voters, made commonplace a new level of political incivility and intemperate rhetoric, and focused that anger upon a convenient set of scapegoats.”¹⁶ What were these voters enraged about? Globalization, neoliberalism, and financialization had not yet arrived on the scene.

For a few examples of the political incivility, intemperate rhetoric, and anger to which Carter refers, consider the following Trump-like moments of Wallace’s campaigning. During the 1964

¹³ Dan T. Carter, “Legacy of Rage: George Wallace and the Transformation of American Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 62:1, Feb. 1996, p. 9.

¹⁴ The earlier front-runner, Edmund Muskie, ran a distant fourth, getting 12% of the popular vote, and dropped out of the race early.

¹⁵ His shares of the vote in the states mentioned were: Tennessee, 68%; Michigan, 51%; North Carolina, 50%; Florida, 42%; Indiana, 41%; Maryland, 39%; West Virginia, 33%; New Mexico, 29%; Wisconsin, 22%; Pennsylvania, 21%; and Oregon, 20%. Wallace also won the Texas caucus, coming away with 43% of its pledged delegates.

¹⁶ Dan T. Carter, “Legacy of Rage: George Wallace and the Transformation of American Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 62:1, Feb. 1996, p. 6.

primaries, 1000 supporters—and about 75 protesters—showed up to hear Wallace speak in Serb Memorial Hall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (which seated 600). The band played “Swanee River,” an infamous racist [minstrel song](#), and the audience sang the Confederate anthem “Dixie” in English and Polish. The man who introduced Wallace, Bronko Gruber, singled out the only members of the audience who didn’t have the “cordiality to stand up” during the national anthem, “these two colored gentlemen here.” The crowd hissed and booed. Another Black protester, a minister, then shouted “Get your dogs out,” referring to a tactic used by Southern police to intimidate civil rights’ protesters. “I’ll tell you something about your dogs, padre,” Gruber replied. “[T]hree weeks ago tonight a friend of mine was assaulted by three of your countrymen or whatever you want to call them.” As the audience urged him on, Gruber continued, “They beat up old ladies, 83 years old, they rape our women folk, how long can we tolerate this?” Wallace said nothing about these comments.¹⁷

This behavior persisted. At a rally in Tennessee during the 1968 race, Wallace famously declared, “If some anarchist lies down in front of my automobile, it will be the last automobile he will ever lie down in front of.” *New Republic* columnist T.R.B. [Richard Strout] described a Wallace rally at New York City’s Madison Square Garden, shortly before that year’s election, as follows: “There is menace in the blood shout of the crowd. You feel you have known this all somewhere; never again will you read about Berlin in the ‘30s without remembering this wild confrontation.”¹⁸ When protesters interrupted this rally, Wallace said: “We don’t have riots in Alabama. They start a riot down there, first one of ’em to pick up a brick gets a bullet in the brain, that’s all.”¹⁹

Unlike Trump, Wallace did not succeed in becoming president. But how well might he have done in 1972 if he had not been burdened with certain disadvantages compared to Trump? What if he had had the advantage of not being a professional politician? The advantage of billions of dollars of his own money, to demonstrate that he could not be “bought”? What if he had been a TV star with 100% name recognition? What if he had had 24/7 media attention and assistance from right-wing and fake news like Trump enjoyed?

And what if he had run as a Republican? This was the main thing that was new about the 2016 election. The Trumpite base is not new—it is not a reaction to neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization. It is a pre-existing condition, as the look back at Wallace’s campaigns has shown. But until 2016, mainstream Republicans managed to retain control of their party, by

¹⁷ For fuller accounts of this meeting, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2d ed. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000, pp. 206–8, and Matthew J. Prigge, “[Dixie North: George Wallace and the 1964 Wisconsin Presidential Primary](#),” *Shepherd Express*, Dec. 22, 2015.

¹⁸ [Richard Strout,] “T.R.B. From Washington,” *New Republic*, Nov. 9, 1968, p. 4. See also Michael A. Cohen, “Trump Rally Oozes Fear, Anxiety, and Paranoia,” *Boston Globe*, Apr. 7, 2016; Cohen writes that he “immediately thought” of Strout’s account of the Wallace rally when he attended a Trump rally on Long Island, New York, last year.

¹⁹ Bill Barrow, “[Are there echoes of George Wallace in Trump’s message?](#),” *PBS Newshour*, *March 24, 2016*.

making concessions to this base and placating it with racist and misogynistic “dog whistles.” In 2016, however, mainstream Republicans lost control. The base was allowed, for the first time, to vote for a Trump, not a mainstream Republican, in the general election. And thus the base wrongly seems—on the surface—to have emerged from out of nowhere, and to be a reaction to recent economic changes.

Lessons from Marx

Taking the “Independent Movement of the Workers” Seriously—and Literally

The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. — Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

As we will see, Marx’s response to the threat of white nationalism was very different from that of much of the “left” today. The basic response of the anti-neoliberal “left” is consonant with its overall orientation, which can be called “Left First.” Its primary concern is to “build the left” and win victories—elections, campaigns, adherents, power—*for itself*. Accordingly, it regards common people as a “constituency” to win over in its quest for political power. And it seemingly has no compunction about winning them over by “meet[ing] them where they are at.”²⁰ Thus, it offers an alternative version of “populism” that (it hopes) the authoritarian white-nationalist base that supports Trump, Le Pen, et al. will find appealing.

As one of its most prominent proponents, Canadian political scientist [Sam Gindin](#), put it last December, “Any attempt to fight the expected direction of the Trump presidency can’t start by blaming the white working class for Trump’s victory but must take the frustrations of the white working class seriously and win them to its side.” And when polls indicated that [as many as 12%](#) of those who voted for anti-neoliberal “left” French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round planned to vote for Le Pen in the second, Mélenchon’s supporters did not accept that this fact raises troubling questions about the character of his campaign. At least one even had the audacity to argue that it was a mark in Mélenchon’s favor, since it showed that his campaign pulled voters away from Le Pen!²¹

To be sure, the “Left First” types do not endorse explicit appeals to white-nationalist sentiments. Their words carefully condemn racism, xenophobia, misogyny, etc. The problem is rather that they seek to win over the authoritarian white-nationalist base by offering one or another “positive program” *that does not fight the base’s authoritarianism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia etc. head on*. For instance, *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara [recently wrote](#) that “Antifascist action is a

²⁰ “Socialist Alternative used what we call ‘the transitional method’: We connect with the consciousness of everyday people, meet them where they are at,” Ramy Khalil, “How a Socialist Won—Lessons from Kshama Sawant’s Historic Victory,” *Socialist Alternative*, Jan. 31, 2014, <https://www.socialistalternative.org/2014/01/31/lessons-kshama-sawants-historic-victory/>.

²¹ This information was obtained through personal Facebook communications.

moral and strategic imperative,” which should go together with “a positive program to contrast with the neoliberal consensus of the center.” For Sunkara, the positive and the negative “come before consciousness without reciprocal contact,” [as Hegel put it](#). The negative component, anti-fascist action, is not allowed to “contaminate” the positive program that can supposedly win people over by “meeting them where they are at.”

This approach is especially dangerous at this moment in history, because it normalizes Trumpism. It treats Trumpism, not as a threat and abomination that must be eliminated, but as a legitimate rival for the allegiance of the “white working class.” It seeks to out-compete its rival on the basis of an alternative-but-comparable “positive program.” This is also the approach encoded in the Democratic Party’s new “[A Better Deal](#)” economic program. The program rails against Wall Street, “[s]pecial interests, lobbyists, and large corporations,” while literally saying *nothing* against Trumpism or against xenophobia, racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.

To understand Marx’s response to the threat of white nationalism, it is imperative to situate it within his overall political-philosophical orientation, and to recognize how sharply the latter contrasts with the “Left First” orientation sketched out above. Here are some of the most striking differences:

- Marx championed and encouraged what he called the “independent movement of the workers.”²² This is simple enough to understand if one takes it literally (as one should). But a long legacy of substitutionism—substitution of some other entity for “the workers”—has made it easy to misunderstand Marx’s meaning. For instance, Jill Stein’s Green Party is construed as an “independent movement” because it is independent of the (explicitly) pro-capitalist political parties and it advocates policies that would supposedly benefit the working class. The championing of such substitutionist “independence” encourages a further error: creation of false equivalences between pro-capitalist politicians, such as Macron and Le Pen, or Clinton and Trump. Macron and Le Pen may indeed be equally bad for the electoral prospects of Mélechon’s movement; and Clinton and Trump may indeed be equally bad for the electoral prospects of the Greens. Yet when one takes Marx literally, the question becomes: Are they equally bad for the future trajectory of the independent movement *of the workers themselves*?
- Marx supported the independent movement of the workers as a necessary means to achieve the goal of overcoming class society and state domination over individuals, not as an end in itself (and certainly not as a means to further “the Left”). From this vantage point, support from below for far-right “populism” is completely retrogressive, notwithstanding its “anti-elite” and “anti-establishment” character, because it rivets working people more firmly to class society and the state. [As Marxist-Humanist Initiative wrote a year ago](#),

We stand for emancipatory self-activity from below. There is no greater obstacle to this than figures such as Trump, who use racism, sexism, etc. to pit working

²² [Capital, vol. 1, chap. 10, sect. 7.](#)

people against one another, in order to divide and conquer them and have them fall in behind the great leader who tells them that “I alone can fix it.”

- Marx’s perspective was thoroughly internationalist. He recognized, of course, that solidarity across national borders strengthened working-class movements. He also staunchly opposed all forms of nationalism that sought to forge or strengthen working people’s identification with the ruling classes of “their” nation, since it is [antithetical to their independent emancipatory self-activity](#): “The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.” “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!”
- Largely for the same reasons—the liberation of workers from identification with “their” ruling classes and international solidarity—Marx opposed and actively fought, not only national and racial prejudices and privileges, but also economic and social conditions that divide working people from one another (e.g., into freemen vs. slaves, and natives vs. immigrants) and thereby foster these prejudices and privileges. This is a main, if not the main, reason why he supported victory for the North in the Civil War (especially once it became an explicit anti-slavery war) and Irish independence from English rule.

In other words, the abolition of slavery in the US and English rule over Ireland were not only good for Blacks and Irish people. *They were good for white and English working people as well.* By weakening their identification with “their” ruling classes and eliminating privileges that kept them from solidarizing with Black and Irish workers, abolition of slavery and English rule would help put *white and English working people* on the path of independent self-activity aiming at the overcoming of class society and class rule.

The contemporary analogue to this is, clearly, the perspective of solidarizing with the “white working class” by decisively defeating Trumpism, white supremacy, etc. Their defeat will help liberate the “white working class” from the grip of reaction and spur its independent emancipatory self-development.

Marx on Irish Independence

In 1867, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (Fenians) rose up in armed struggle to win Ireland’s independence from England. Although Marx was sharply critical of their terroristic methods, he—as well as Frederick Engels and their organization, the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA; i.e., the First International)—actively supported the struggle and organized unsuccessfully to secure amnesty for Fenian political prisoners.²³

²³ After three Fenians were executed, Engels remarked, “To my knowledge, the only time that anybody has been executed for a similar matter in a civilised country was the case of [martyred American abolitionist] John Brown at Harpers Ferry,” but he added that the action of the English government was even less civilized, since “[t]he Southerners had at least the decency to treat J. Brown as a *rebel*, whereas here everything is being done to transform a political attempt into a common crime” (Nov. 24, 1867 letter to Marx; emphasis in original).

However, it was not until the end of 1869 and start of 1870 that Marx worked out a forceful theoretical position in favor of Irish independence. He developed this position in private communications and in official documents of the IWMA, which adopted and worked to carry out his perspective.

English workers' "own social emancipation"

His principal reason for supporting Irish independence was not "humanitarian." He was instead seeking to stimulate the independent emancipatory self-development of the working class, especially the *English* working class. In a November 29, 1869 letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, Marx stressed that his aim was not merely to "speak[] out loudly and decidedly for the oppressed Irish against their oppressors." He wanted the English working class to fight for the independence of Ireland, "not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat." Similarly, in a December 10, 1869 letter to Engels, Marx wrote that, while support for "'international' and 'humane' *justice for Ireland*" should be "taken for granted," there was an additional reason why Irish independence was important: "*it is in the direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland*" (emphases in original).

Three weeks later (on January 1, 1870) a "confidential communication" from the IWMA's General Council to its section in "French Switzerland," written by Marx, stated that

quite apart from the demands of international justice, it is an essential precondition for the emancipation of the English working class to transform the present enforced union [the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland] (in other words, the enslavement of Ireland) into a free and equal confederation, if possible, and into a total separation, if necessary.²⁴

And on April 9, 1870, Marx wrote to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt that it was the "special task" of the IWMA's General Council to "make the English workers realise that *for them* the *national emancipation of Ireland* is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the *first condition of their own social emancipation*" (emphases in original).

This position raises a couple of questions. First, if Marx and the IWMA were so internationalist, then why were they so concerned with the working class of one single country, England? The answer is that, in Marx's view, the English working class was crucial because revolution in England was the lynchpin of world revolution. He argued in the January 1, 1870 "confidential communication" that England was not "simply ... a country along with other countries[, but] the *metropolis of capital*." A "revolution in economic matters" there "must immediately affect the whole world." Moreover, class antagonisms had become much more simplified in England (into a head-to-head antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) than they were

²⁴ The confidential communication's discussion of Ireland was repeated, almost verbatim, in a letter of March 28, 1870 that Marx sent to Kugelmann, for distribution to leaders of the German Social-Democratic Worker's Party.

elsewhere, and it was the only country in which working-class struggle and organization had acquired “a certain degree of maturity and universality.” Thus, “England alone can serve as a *lever* for a serious *economic* revolution” (even though “revolutionary *initiative* will probably come from France”).²⁵

This perspective has relevance today, when the US is the “metropolis of capital.” An economic revolution in the U. would have even more of an immediate effect on the whole world than a revolution in England would have had in Marx’s day. Thus, while we certainly cannot pander to white-nationalist sentiment within the so-called “white working class,” we must be concerned especially—but not exclusively—with the emancipatory self-development of the US working class (which is multi-racial, -ethnic, and –national), inasmuch as it is critical to world revolution.

Irish immigration and xenophobia

Second, how could Marx argue that Irish independence was in the “absolute interest” of the *English* working class? He was keenly aware of facts that seemed to suggest otherwise, facts rooted in Irish immigration to England. In a passage of his letter to Meyer and Vogt that is particularly salient to today’s struggles over immigration, Marx noted that, because Irish peasants were being steadily evicted from the land and “forced” to emigrate, “Ireland constantly sends her own surplus [population] to the English labour market.” And he argued that the consequent over-supply of labor in England “forces down wages and lowers the material and moral position of the English working class.” As a result, “[t]he ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life.”

But this hatred was not merely economic. It was shot through-and-through with prejudice, supremacist attitudes, and nationalistic identification with the English ruling classes:

In relation to the Irish worker[, the ordinary English worker] 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.

Furthermore, the Irish masses returned the hatred. In both England and the U.S. (where Fenianism was especially strong among Irish immigrants) “[t]he Irishman ... sees in the English worker both the accomplice and the stupid tool of the *English rulers in Ireland*.” Thus, “[e]very industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians.”²⁶

²⁵ Emphases in original. See also Marx’s April 9, 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt.

²⁶ All quotes in this and the preceding two paragraphs are from Marx’s April 9, 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt. Emphases are Marx’s. The January 1, 1870 confidential communication from the IWMA’s General Council contains a very similar analysis of the causes and effects of Irish

Faced with somewhat similar facts today, prominent voices in the anti-neoliberal “left” want to “meet people where they are at.” For example, the leader of the alleged left-wing of Germany’s Die Linke party, [Sahra Wagenknecht](#), “is trying to win over large chunks of working- and middle-class supporters of the AfD [*Alternative für Deutschland*],” a racist, xenophobic, far-right party. She favors limits on immigration into Germany and deportation of at least some immigrants convicted of crimes. And Gindin, in his quest to “[build a mass socialist party](#),” wants to win people over to a “regulated border policy,” on the grounds that support for “fully open borders in the present context of economic insecurity cannot help but elicit a backlash Workers who have seen their own standards undermined over time ... are not going to prioritize open borders.”

Freeing English workers from the “leading-strings” of the ruling classes

Marx’s attitude was the exact opposite. He did not compromise with xenophobia or anti-immigrant sentiment. *Because his goal was the emancipatory self-development of the working class, not winning over a “constituency” to his party or program, he focused unwaveringly on the actual—world-historic—interests of the working class. He did not pander to the perceived interests, or the interests-within-capitalism, of those elements of the working class whose existing opinions impeded the struggle for the freedom of every individual.*

In Marx’s view, the nationalism and anti-Irish sentiment of much of the English working class were crucial impediments to that struggle. To overcome these impediments, English rule over Ireland needed to be ended. As long as the United Kingdom remained in existence, “the English people will remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because it will have to join with them in a common front against Ireland. Every one of its movements in England itself is

immigration to England:

In the second place, in dragging down the working class in England still further by the forced immigration of poor Irish people, the English bourgeoisie has not merely exploited Irish poverty. It has also divided the proletariat into two hostile camps. The fiery rebelliousness of the Celtic worker does not mingle well with the steady slow nature of the Anglo-Saxon; in fact in all *the major industrial centres of England* there is a profound antagonism between the Irish and the English proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who brings down his wages and standard of living. He also feels national and religious antipathies for him; it is rather the same attitude that the poor whites of the Southern states of North America had for the Negro slaves. This antagonism between the two groups of proletarians within England itself is artificially kept in being and fostered by the bourgeoisie, who know well that this split is the real secret of preserving their own power.

This antagonism is reproduced once again on the other side of the Atlantic. The Irish, driven from their native soil by cattle and sheep, have landed in North America where they form a considerable, and increasing, proportion of the population. Their sole thought, their sole passion, is their hatred for England. [emphasis in original]

crippled by the strife with the Irish ...” (letter to Kugelmann, November 29, 1869). The metaphor of *leading-strings*—strips of fabric attached to children’s clothes, which adults held and used to restrain the children or help them walk—suggests that the nationalism of much of the English working class allowed the ruling classes to restrain and control them.

Marx argued, further, that the English bourgeoisie consciously exploited and fomented nationalism and anti-Irish sentiment in order to stay in power. The January 1, 1870 confidential IWMA communication stated that “[t]his antagonism between the two groups of proletarians [English and Irish] within England itself is artificially kept in being and fostered by the bourgeoisie, who know well that this split is the real secret of preserving their own power.” And in his April 9, 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt, Marx wrote,

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. [emphases in original]

Marx’s account identified two distinct sources of anti-Irish sentiment within the English working class. One was that competition from Irish immigrant workers was driving down their wages. The other was that native-English workers tended to look down upon Irish immigrants. As we have seen, Marx compared their typical attitude to the attitude of “the ‘poor whites’ to the Negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A.”²⁷

Engels reiterated this analogy in May 14, 1872 meeting (that Marx did not attend) of the IWMA General Council, in a statement opposing a proposal to subsume Irish sections of the IWMA under the British Federal Council. He denounced it as analogous to “members of a conquering nation call[ing] upon the nation they had conquered and continued to hold down to forget their specific nationality and position, to ‘sink national differences’ and so forth.” That is

not Internationalism[; ... it is] attempting to justify and to perpetuate the dominion of the conqueror under the cloak of Internationalism[, ... and] sanctioning the belief, only too common among the English working men, that they were superior beings compared to the Irish, and as much an aristocracy as the mean whites of the Slave States considered themselves to be with regard to the Negroes.

The *coincidence* of these two sources of anti-Irish sentiment—job-market competition and supremacist attitudes—is important. In the absence of supremacist thinking, Marx might conceivably have favored dealing with the job-competition problem with a “unite and fight”

²⁷ As in the US case, though to a lesser degree, the feeling of superiority had a material basis. Irish immigrants in England suffered from economic and social disadvantages (and, possibly, residential segregation). They disproportionately lived in slums racked with disease, violence, and alcohol abuse, and they tended to take the dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest-paid jobs. A [ballad of the time](#) stated that “When work grew scarce, and bread was dear / And wages lessened too / The Irish hordes were bidders here / Our half paid work to do.”

working-class strategy that overlooked national differences.²⁸ For instance, native-English and immigrant-Irish workers might have been able to join together to form unions in order to reduce competition between them and thereby relieve downward pressure on the wages of both groups.

Accelerating the “catastrophe of official England”

In fact, *Jacobin*'s Seth Ackerman actually had the audacity to tell us that this is what Marx recommended.²⁹ But not only does Marx's text say nothing about the Irish “unit[ing] with the English workers in England”; what it does say makes clear that it would have been ludicrous to try to implement the class-reductionist and economic perspective favored by Ackerman. Owing to anti-Irish prejudice within the English working class, and the consequent antagonism between English and Irish workers, any “sink national differences; unite and fight” strategy was simply untenable.

In her response to Ackerman, [Jennifer Roesch](#), a member of the International Socialist Organization (US), recognized that he “miss[ed] the entire thrust of Marx's argument.” But she missed it as well, writing that Marx was “call[ing] for the English worker to overcome his ‘artificial antagonism’ in order to make a united working class movement possible.”

This reading is almost as unrooted in the texts as Ackerman's is. Marx had come to the conclusion that, as English rule over Ireland persisted, appeals for unity (such as the one that Roesch put into his mouth) were abstract and futile. As he wrote to Engels on December 11, 1869,

For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. ... Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will *never accomplish anything* before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland.³⁰ [emphasis in original]

²⁸ Given Marx's unwavering internationalism and his desire to free English workers from the “leading-strings” of their ruling classes, support for immigration controls would still have been out of the question. His 1869–70 letters and confidential IWMA communications on Ireland implicitly put forward a quite different—revolutionary—solution to the job-competition problem: Irish independence would break the power of the absentee English landlords whose evictions of Irish peasants from the land were a key cause of their migration to England and elsewhere. Earlier, Marx had opined that “the characteristic features of Fenianism are socialistic tendencies (in a negative sense, directed against the appropriation of the soil) and the fact that it is a movement of the lower orders” (letter to Engels, November 30, 1867).

²⁹ After quoting the relevant section of Marx's letter to Meyer and Vogt, [Ackerman sarcastically commented](#): “As a social theorist, Marx unfortunately lacked the subtlety of, say, a Hillary Clinton [who said that ‘racial inequality is not merely a symptom of economic inequality’]. His ‘reductionist’ solution was for the Irish to free themselves from their English landlords in Ireland—and unite with the English workers in England.”

³⁰ Emphasis in original. Marx's November 29, 1869 letter to Kugelmann similarly argued that “the English working class ... can never do anything decisive here in England” as long as England continued to rule over Ireland.

This letter does not explain how Marx came to this conclusion. However, he wrote to Kugelmann twelve days earlier that, unless and until Ireland was freed from English rule, “the English people ... *will have to* join with [their ruling classes] in a common front against Ireland” (emphasis added), and they will therefore “remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes.”³¹

Marx therefore eschewed empty appeals to English workers to overcome their anti-Irish prejudice that failed to confront the objective conditions that engendered the prejudice. What he actually called for—to change the objective situation—was *the defeat of England in its struggle with Ireland*:

It is ... the most important object of the International Working Men’s Association to hasten the social revolution in England. *The sole means* of hastening it is to make Ireland independent. Hence it is the task of the International everywhere to put the conflict between England and Ireland in the foreground, and *everywhere to side openly with Ireland*. [April 9, 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt, emphases added]

To accelerate the social development in Europe, you must push on [*beschleunigen*, accelerate] the *catastrophe of official England*. To do so, you must attack her in Ireland. That’s her weakest point. Ireland lost, the British “Empire” is gone, and the class war in England, till now somnolent and chronic, will assume acute forms. [March 5, 1870 letter to Paul and Laura Lafargue, emphasis added]

Thus, in Marx’s view, it was futile to appeal to English workers to overcome their hostility to their Irish counterparts *unless that appeal was tied tightly to the defeat of England*.³² *Only England’s defeat would deflate their supremacist pretensions, free them from identifying their interests with those of the English ruling classes, and put them on an independent, internationalist, and emancipatory path.*

With the rise of far-right xenophobic nationalism, we face a somewhat similar situation today. While much of the anti-neoliberal “left” was muting its opposition to Trump, if not indeed enabling his victory, on the grounds that he enjoyed strong support from some of the “white working class,” [Marxist-Humanist Initiative warned](#) that there is no greater obstacle to emancipatory self-activity from below than politicians like Trump, who pit working people against one another, in order to divide and conquer them, and strive to make them his followers. Only the defeat of Trumpism can deflate the supremacist pretensions of Trump’s white-

³¹ Extant texts seem to contain no direct explanation for why Marx thought that English workers would be compelled to take to the side of their ruling classes, but the most likely explanation is that job-market competition objectively pitted English workers against Irish immigrants.

³² When the two things *were* tied tightly together, Marx did of course favor and participate in activity to lessen anti-Irish prejudices. In October 1869, the IWMA General Council helped to organize a mass “Justice for Ireland!” demonstration in London that called for amnesty for Irish political prisoners. According to General Council minutes of October 26, Marx said that the “main feature” of the demonstration was that “at least part of the English working class ha[s] lost their prejudice against the Irish.”

nationalist base, free it from his leading-strings, and re-orient it toward genuinely independent—i.e., anti-racist, internationalist, emancipatory—self-activity.

The Impact of the US Civil War on Emancipatory Working-Class Self-Activity

Marx, as well as Engels, closely followed and wrote extensively about the US Civil War. Their writings on the war consist largely of battle reports, discussions of military strategy and tactics, and analyses of changes in the political situation in the North. But various other topics were also taken up. Raya Dunayevskaya's commentary in [Marxism and Freedom](#) remains important for highlighting Marx's support for and engagement with the Abolitionist movement and the changes that he made to his book *Capital* under the impact of the Civil War. Here, where we will focus on what can be learned from these writings about white nationalism and how to combat it, we can be fairly brief.

Marx supported the North in the Civil War, not only in his writings but in organizational activity as well. He helped to organize a March 1863 meeting, sponsored by the London Trade-Unions council, and attended by as many as 3000 people, that successfully opposed Britain's entrance into the war on behalf of the South. (The English union leaders involved in organizing that meeting went on to join with Marx in founding the IWMA eighteen months later.)

His support for the North was unwavering, even though he was well aware that it was by no means "pure." In an October 11, 1861 [article in the New York Daily Tribune](#), Marx discussed bourgeois London publications that took the opposite tack: they "affect[ed] an utter horror of Slavery" but took a "hostile tone against the North, and [harbored] ill-concealed sympathies with the South." For example, he quoted complaints in *The Economist* that Abolitionists had been mistreated in the North, and that the US government had impeded efforts to end the international slave trade, which was mainly financed and operated by Northerners.

Marx did not dispute these facts. Instead, he exposed what would today be called the *whataboutism* of *The Economist*: "The necessity of justifying its attitude by such pettifogging Old Bailey pleas proves more than anything else that the anti-Northern part of the English press is instigated by hidden motives, too mean and dastardly to be openly avowed." (There is an unmistakable parallel to this today, when the anti-neoliberal "left" spends its time railing endlessly against the impurity of Hillary Clinton, "centrists," and liberals, while letting Trump and Trumpism off the hook by dismissing them as a "distraction." Does this whataboutism hide motives that they choose not to avow openly?)

Marx's overriding reason for supporting the North, despite its checkered past, is that he was convinced that its victory would put an end to slavery in the US. That fact, which is obvious now, was not so obvious then. The North's original aim in the war was not to free the slaves, but to preserve the Union, and Lincoln did not emancipate the slaves in the South until the middle of the war. However, Marx anticipated that the war would result in the abolition of slavery, in part because the North would probably have to free the slaves in order to defeat the South.

In a May 6, 1861 letter to Lion Philips, he predicted the ultimate victory of the North, “since, if the need arises, it has a last card up its sleeve in the shape of a slave revolution.” In an August 7, 1862 letter of Engels, Marx attributed the North’s early difficulties in the war to the fact that it was focused on preserving the Union, not ending slavery: “wars of this kind ought to be conducted along revolutionary lines, and the Yankees have so far been trying to conduct it along constitutional ones.” But he predicted that “[t]he North will, at last, wage the war in earnest, have recourse to revolutionary methods and overthrow the supremacy of the border slave statesmen. One single n[_____] regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves.”³³ On September 22, Lincoln announced his intention to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. In an article published by *Die Presse* on October 12, Marx wrote that this “proclamation ... is the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union, tantamount to the tearing tip of the old American Constitution.”

Grounds of Marx’s anti-slavery activity

Why was the abolition of slavery so important to Marx? He was, of course, staunchly opposed to it on “humanitarian” grounds. He [wrote in *Capital*](#) that a world market for Southern cotton had led to “the over-working of the negro and sometimes the using up of his life in 7 years of labour became a factor in a calculated and calculating system” in which “the civilised horrors of over-work [were] grafted on the barbaric horrors of slavery”

However, just as in the case of Irish independence, Marx’s concern was not solely “humanitarian.” He was also doing what he could to accelerate the “independent movement of the workers”—white as well as Black, and internationally as well as in the US. He considered abolition of slavery, and thus victory for the North, to be in the interest of the whole working class. For instance, when Lincoln was re-elected president in 1864, Marx wrote [a congratulatory “address” to him, on behalf of the IWMA](#), which stated, “The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes.”

In the same address, Marx wrote:

While the workingmen, the true political powers of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor, or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation; but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.

A lot of ideas are packed into this sentence. Marx criticizes white workers for allowing slavery to “defile their own republic” and for prizing their privileged status vis-à-vis Black slaves. He also

³³ After the Emancipation Proclamation was announced, the North did begin to recruit Blacks to the military, and in May 1863 it established the Bureau of Colored Troops. By the end of the war, almost 200,000 Blacks served in the Northern army and navy.

criticizes them for their lack of solidarity with European workers. He characterizes their attitude to the slaves and slavery as a “barrier to progress”—not only to the progress of the slaves, but to their own progress as well, since their attitude prevented them from “attain[ing] the true freedom of labor” (an apparent euphemism for a classless socialist society). And finally, he hails the actions of the North in the Civil War for having swept away this barrier to progress.

Here again, then, Marx focused on the actual—world-historic—interests of the working class. He did not take his cue from the perceived interests of elements of the working class whose existing opinions were barriers to their own progress. And just as he would soon champion the Irish struggle for independence because of its potential to deal a blow against the supremacist attitudes of English workers that diverted them from the revolutionary, internationalist path, he here championed the North’s war against slavery for its potential to deal a blow against the supremacist attitudes that diverted the “white working class” of the US.

A few years later, Marx reiterated the same idea in [a famous passage in *Capital*](#): “In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” Taken by itself, this latter statement is somewhat vague. Marx does not spell out *why* “labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” When read together with the address to Lincoln, however, it becomes clear that Marx is suggesting that supremacist thinking and acceptance of slavery among elements of the “white working class” of the U.S. caused them to “forge their own chains.” (The January 1, 1870 confidential communication from the IWMA’s General Council would later express a similar thought, regarding the attitudes of the England masses to the Irish: “What ancient Rome demonstrated on a gigantic scale can be seen—in the England of today. A people which subjugates another people forges its own chains.”)

But when Marx made the statement about labor in the white and black skins, the slaves were already free and the North had won the Civil War. He noted with approval that these events had begun to undo the “paralysis” of the working-class movement: “But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours’ agitation [i.e., agitation for the workday to be legally limited to eight hours], that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.” A May 12, 1869 address of the IWMA to the National Labor Union in the US, written by Marx, [reiterated this point](#) as follows:

the victorious termination of the antislavery war has opened a new epoch in the annals of the working class. In the States themselves, an independent working-class movement, looked upon with an evil eye by your old parties and their professional politicians, has since that date sprung into life. ...

On you, then, depends the glorious task to prove to the world that now at last the working classes are bestriding the scene of history no longer as servile retainers but as

independent actors, conscious of their own responsibility, and able to command peace where their would-be masters shout war.³⁴

Summary and Conclusion

This essay has shown that the narrative of the anti-neoliberal “left” contains crucial factual flaws. Trump’s electoral victory does not represent a revolt of the “white working class” against “economic distress” imposed by neoliberalism and globalization. The real, per-person, income of the US working class did not stagnate, “economic distress” was not among the reasons why key Rustbelt states flipped to Trump, and Trumpism is a pre-existing condition—Wallace-ism redux—not a reaction to neoliberalism or globalization.

In addition, I have argued that, because Marx’s aim was to encourage the “independent movement of the workers” toward human emancipation, not to further the interests of “the left,” he did not pander to white-nationalist sentiments within the working class. On the contrary, he regarded white nationalism and ethnic nationalism as crucial barriers to the emancipatory self-development of the class. They impeded international and interracial working-class solidarity, and they were also contrary to the interests of white workers in the US and native workers in England. White- and ethnic-nationalist attitudes among these workers induced them to identify with “their” ruling classes, which enabled the latter to restrain and control them.

This essay has emphasized that Marx did not merely decry white nationalism; he sought to defeat it. He called for and worked for the defeat of the Confederacy in the US Civil War, and the defeat of England in its effort to preserve its rule over Ireland, largely because of the damage that this would do to white- and ethnic-English nationalism. He anticipated that the defeats of the South and England would deal a strong blow against the supremacist attitudes of many white and English workers, and a strong blow against their identification with the ruling classes of “their” nation or race.

Time is running dangerously short. Trump wields enormous power, and he may well do unprecedented and irreversible harm to human civilization if given the chance. Compromises with white nationalism, disregard for its dangers, and abstract rhetoric about inter-racial and inter-national unity are not solutions; they have contributed to the crisis we now face. The time is now to reclaim the revolutionary humanism of Marx’s struggle against white nationalism. We must decisively defeat Trumpism and other manifestations of far-right xenophobia and racism—and soon. Their defeat is in the interest of all humanity. Not least, it is in the interest of the white-nationalist base that Trump has in his grip. Only the defeat of Trumpism can free it from his grip and help redirect it away from white nationalism, and onto the path of independent emancipatory self-activity.

³⁴ The comment about war and peace is part of the address’s call on the National Labor Union to try to help prevent a war between the US and the United Kingdom.