

# Why the Central Focus of the World Revolutionary Movement Must Be the Destruction of Racism

## Building a Revolutionary Egalitarian Movement Led by the Poorest and Darkest, Especially Women

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### Who Are We?

The writers of this discussion document are the organizer training collective of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing (ISBO). The paper was written with the help of numerous readers, contributors and critics from several countries. The final document was consolidated, edited and prepared by Curtis Muhammad and Kathy Fischer.

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### Introduction and Overview

The goal of the revolutionary movement is to end all forms of oppression and build a world of complete equality, created and led by the people themselves. Right now, the movement is stalled. It will not be possible for it to move forward by doing the same things it has done in the past: what didn't work twenty years ago or fifty years ago won't work today either. The struggle for humanity and the world requires a great leap forward.

The purpose of this paper is to propose what seems to be needed to make that great leap forward, which humanity so desperately needs.

*First, a disclaimer: The writers of this document are a small collective of revolutionary organizers, supported and assisted by a larger group of readers and critics from several countries who have provided invaluable insight and knowledge to help us craft the ideas presented here. Everyone who has contributed to this thinking considers themselves part of the communist movement. We staunchly reject anti-communism. Although we are offering a critique of the past and current communist movement, we also recognize that anti-communism has been and is, aside from racism, the foremost tool used by the people's enemies to attack and discredit the movement for an egalitarian new world. We are not associated with any party now, but have been long-term members of Marxist-Leninist groupings during our lifetimes, and have taken and continue to take inspiration from the communist-led movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as from African-American freedom movements in this hemisphere. Yes, in this paper we will criticize communist leaders for what we think they "got wrong," but it is in an attempt to take what they "got right" beyond where it is stuck. We reject in advance anyone who would describe us as*

*anti-communist. We stand, in part, on the shoulders of the old communist revolutionaries. We are firmly committed to “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” We call for the science of communism to be applied to a correct understanding of the interrelationship of class and hue and a correct understanding of the historic struggles of dark-skinned people. We feel that only in this way will the oppressed masses of the whole world, of all hues, collectively find our way forward.*

*Secondly, we equally reject nationalism and any attempt to describe us as nationalist. Our goal is a revolutionary transformation of the entire world made by an internationalist movement that includes all oppressed people, of every hue and “nation.” We focus in this paper on the experience of Africans in the Americas because we think that their exclusion from the analysis of what capitalism is, and the exclusion of their thinking and organizing from the modern revolutionary movement have combined to put the movement on a dead-end track. We believe that the relationship between hue (skin color) and class exploitation has not been correctly understood as two sides of the same coin. Anyone can notice that wherever you find the people of darkest hue, in any part of the world, they are nearly always the poorest and most oppressed of all our brothers and sisters. Even within families, those with lighter skin are usually favored over those with darker skin. While we implacably hate the oppression of all human beings of every hue, we focus this paper on the experience of the darkest and their particular role in history and revolution. We recognize with horror the mass enslavement and genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the slavery, torture, rape and profound oppression of our brothers and sisters in Asia and the rest of the world. However, we also recognize that when white dominated organizations are confronted with their racism, they often point to their solidarity with “people of color” as a way to avoid dealing with dark skinned folk. Brown, red and yellow people are and have been historically tolerated to the exclusion of the dark. This has acted to make unity between black, brown, red and yellow difficult to attain. In this paper, we are presenting the case of the darkest of the dark as the place we must all begin in our struggle to free humanity from hue and class slavery.*

The writers of this document suggest that in order for society to move past capitalism and racism, revolutionaries must make use of where the science of Marx and Engels has taken the revolutionary movement up to now, but also move beyond it. It is clear from the writing of those founders of modern communism that they regarded dark-skinned people throughout the world, and specifically, Africans in Africa and the Americas, as less human than Europeans. We will show that they said this explicitly, and that this thinking led them to misunderstand some fundamental aspects of capitalism. On the basis of this distorted and mistaken thinking, they drew conclusions about classes and class struggle that history has proven wrong. They based their analysis on the experience of about 2.5% of the world’s people, a tiny, white, minority of the world’s oppressed masses.

When they referred to non-European parts of the world as “barbaric,” we think they referred not only to non-industrial economies, but also to peoples they considered less evolved. Their emphasis on industrial relations of production creating the most advanced

class and the most advanced thinking, we argue, was mistaken. According to their thinking at the time, there was no sense even imagining a communist revolution in a “backward” country, which was a description that applied to all the countries where people had dark skin.

Until now, these racist problems in Marx’ and Engels’ writing have not been systematically challenged, analyzed and corrected, despite the fact that Marxists and the communist movement have risen above them and become leaders in the fight against racism. Some revolutionaries, particularly dark-skinned revolutionaries from outside the European context have been painfully aware of this problem, but hesitant to criticize the founders of modern communism for fear of giving comfort to the enemy, or for fear of being seen as giving comfort to the enemy. However, true revolutionaries do not believe that any individual is perfect and do not accept the cult of the individual. We need to have the courage to look objectively at the science of revolution without worrying about whose toes we step on in the process. It is time to move beyond the Eurocentric stamp that Marx and Engels put on all subsequent revolutionary thought.

### The Roots of the Modern Revolutionary Movement

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the birth-century of what most of us today consider to be the modern revolutionary movement. That century opened with the successful revolutionary takeover of Haiti from French slaveholders by African former slaves. By the 1830s, slave resistance, escape, and massive slave rebellions in the colonies, with the alliance of an abolitionist movement, ended chattel slavery of Africans in the British Empire (though its rule in India, China and elsewhere continued to contain elements of slavery for another hundred years). In the 1840s, revolutionary movements of factory workers swept Europe and produced the communist theories and organizing of Marx and Engels and the communists. During this same period, a remarkable movement was happening within the capitalist/slave republic of the United States that produced some of the most egalitarian thoughts and actions of the century and resulted in a massive civil war that ended slavery there. Interconnected with this US anti-slavery movement was a groundbreaking move to recognize the equality of women and demand equal treatment for the female half of humankind. In the 1860s and 70s, black former slaves in the U.S. and workers in Paris both created mass revolutionary experiments in communal living and governance.

The struggle against slavery in the Americas has not usually been considered a part of the modern revolutionary movement. That struggle was born long before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It began with organized resistance to slave-catchers in Africa, and existed in every part of the “new world” where enslaved Africans were taken. Within that struggle there was not only resistance and rebellion, but also the creation of independent, free communities of escaped slaves that defended themselves against the slave owners and their governments. These existed in every slaveholding region: the Caribbean, South America, Central America and North America. Former slaves from many regions actually made their way back to Africa, as well, and formed communities there whose descendants still identify with their American-born ancestors. In the Americas, these rebels brought many Native and European Americans into the struggle under their leadership. Many of their leaders,

organizers and fighters were women. The anti-slavery struggle was an enormous, mass movement, involving millions of people, which had sophisticated and courageous thinkers and organizers and international connections.

All of these mass struggles produced ideas and inspiration about how to achieve a world of equality and end the exploitation of most of humanity by a small class of people. However, the ideas and experiences of Africans in the Americas have not until now been harvested, analyzed and used as part of the ideology that guides the modern revolutionary movement. There has been a literal disconnect between, in particular, European-based and African-based revolutionary thinking.

The communist movement arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it became the main science of revolution and force for revolutionary change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in Europe, but also in Africa, Asia and the Americas. It was a tremendous movement, which took power in huge portions of the earth for a brief time, and inspired rebellions and struggles nearly everywhere. People who were involved in struggle during the years from the 1920s to the 1960s thought surely they would live to see the people win victory over oppression and create a free and equal world. The goals of communism reflected the hearts and minds of almost every oppressed person: the goal of creating a world that would operate on the basis of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.”

However, the communist movement, including its modern descendants, have had some problems and weaknesses, and at least one fatal flaw, that have caused it to crushingly defeat itself, causing sorrow and disillusionment, and condemning humanity to many more years of capitalist slavery, wars and exploitation. There is no country in the world today that is controlled by the people; the countries that had communist revolutions are now capitalist. In fact, they went back to capitalism under the rule of the same generation that made the revolution.

It is time for those of us who are committed heart and soul to egalitarian revolution to face the defeat of the old communist movement and figure out how to move forward from here. We do not think any of the existing parties and groups has yet recognized the profound nature of the errors of the old movement, despite the genuine dedication they may have to the goal of achieving communist egalitarianism. Where did the science go wrong, and how do we fix it?

We suggest that the communist movement’s fatal flaw was and still is a misunderstanding of capitalism, and how to overcome it, that stems from blind spots in the thinking of the “fathers” of communism. These blind spots were caused by racism. Although there were other mistakes that need addressing as well, we assert that racism is the primary underlying reason why the communist revolutionary movement failed. *This is not to say that communists are racists; communists fight against racism, often heroically. It is to say that the communist movement has not understood racism correctly and this has skewed its whole analysis and strategy.* In order for the egalitarian goals of the revolutionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to come to pass, this fatal flaw will need to be turned into its opposite and **the fight against racism will need to become the main**

**strength and the core of the revolutionary movement. The lessons of the African-led struggles in the Americas will need to be studied and learned. And the new movement that results will need to be led by the portion of humanity that has the clearest understanding of racism: those whom racism targets.**

### The Problem of Racism in the Communist Movement

The problem started because Marx' and Engels' vision was impaired by racism. The problem also started because those revolutionaries who had the greatest understanding of racism – primarily slaves and former slaves and their allies in the Americas – did not have a systematic analysis and vision for transforming the entire system of capitalism. These two strands of revolutionary thought and action have never come together. **The science of communism in the early years did not make a correct and thorough analysis of the role of skin color and the struggles of dark-skinned people, and the modern communist movement has not yet done so either.**

Marx and Engels, the founders of modern communism, lived in Europe at a time when European governments ruled the world. Europe's people had white skin (with the exception of a few servants and slaves); the people of the rest of the world had dark skin. Europe's ruling classes had brutally driven the European working people off the land and into factories, and had subjugated and enslaved the working people in much of the rest of the world to provide the materials they needed for their factories. Europe's rulers systematically developed a racist way of thinking that said that people with white skin were more advanced, smarter, even more attractive than people with darker skin, especially people with very dark skin, who were described as backward, unintelligent, ungodly and ugly: "savages" who could only improve by being ruled by the white colonial overlords and slave owners.

Marx and Engels resisted that thinking up to a point, but not in a thorough way. They, too, though Europeans were more advanced. They suggested that there were two ways for people in the colonies to move forward. One way was for workers in Europe to make revolution, which would thereby free the colonies to develop. The other was for colonial peoples to fight for independence from the colonists and establish "their own" capitalist republics. Either way, they were not "ready" to fight for freedom and egalitarianism (socialism or communism) on their own. They had to first reach the level of industrial and cultural "advancement" that Europe had already achieved. Some later communists eventually rejected this analysis, but not for a hundred years, and then without an understanding of the deep racism that was underlying it.

Marx and Engels thought that colonial peoples were less advanced than Europeans not only because their societies were less industrialized, but also because their people were less evolved, culturally and biologically. Engels wrote that evolution had happened to a different "degree and direction varying among different peoples . . . and here and there even being interrupted by local or temporary regression." In other words, some people were more evolved than others (who were more like our ape-like ancestors). When writing about evolution of humans, he said, "The lowest savages, even those in whom

regression to a more animal-like condition with a simultaneous physical degeneration can be assumed, are nevertheless far superior to these transitional beings [ape-men, also called anthropoid apes].” Part of the way evolution worked to create these different levels of human advancement was that the “transition from the uniformly hot climate . . . to colder regions” called for “new spheres of labor . . . which further and further separated man from the animal.” In other words, people living in cold climates are more human than those living in tropical climates. The examples Engels gave of the most advanced, intelligent and creative humans were all Europeans. (These quotes are from “The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man,” written in 1876.) It is clear from these quotes that Engels thought white Europeans were more advanced, and that some non-European people were “lowest savages.” We can safely assume that Engels’ “lowest savages” were the same people that were considered “savages” by many Europeans at that time: first, Africans, who were actively being hunted and enslaved, second other peoples of color, such as Native Americans and Asians. Marx’s name is not on this document, but he did not criticize its content, so we can assume he was in agreement with it. For at least fifty years before Engels published this pamphlet, there had been educated, published Europeans and Americans writing and speaking about the equality of all humankind. Frederick Douglass was only one internationally known example. Marx and Engels did not agree.

During the United States’ Civil War, which was the war that ended slavery in the US, Marx wrote about it for the British, US and German press, and Marx and Engels wrote many letters to each other discussing the war. From these writings, it is clear that they were against slavery, but the letters *do not mention racism or the equality of black and white people*. They write detailed analysis of the conduct of the war, and give credit to European radicals: “Without the considerable mass of military experience that emigrated to America in consequence of the European revolutionary commotions of 1848-1849, the organization of the Union Army would have required a much longer time.” But they *completely miss* the pivotal military role that black people played in that war. Slaves left plantations to come to the Union army, weakening the South by leaving it without its full force of agricultural workers. Black people in the North joined the Union Army in large numbers. Even escaped slaves living peacefully in Canada returned to join the fight. These black soldiers fought heroically, even though they were often not paid or properly equipped. It was this mass influx of black soldiers and runaways who won the war for the North. Lincoln acknowledged the necessity of the black fighters when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation: he did so for military reasons, not humanitarian ones (the Proclamation did not emancipate slaves belonging to people who lived in areas loyal to the North). Marx and Engels, even in their private letters to each other, showed no understanding of this well-established military fact, despite the fact that it was being discussed both in writing and from abolitionist platforms in the US and England. They also showed no understanding of the profound vision of and commitment to equality that motivated the black soldiers. Instead, they congratulated Lincoln for freeing the slaves: “it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.” (This is from a letter from the International Workingmen’s Association to Lincoln when he was re-elected to his second term. In a

letter to Engels on December 2, 1864, Marx said that he wrote this letter.) This was a dramatically mistaken analysis of the events and the people. Slaves and free blacks rescued the Union, not the other way around. Marx and Engels, *because they did not conceive of black people as fully human*, could not conceive of them playing a significant role in the direction of human history, so they literally couldn't "see" it. *Racism caused them to be blind to the truth.*



An 1838 portrayal of emancipation as a gift from the British Empire to grateful slaves (reproduced from *Bury the Chains*)

During the Civil War, Marx was also writing *Capital*, which was published in 1867. In the first volume of this long and careful economic analysis of how capitalism works, there are two only two mentions of black people, despite the fact that their labor was a key part of the capitalist economy. In chapter 10, in a list of particularities of capitalism in various countries, we see the quote that has become famous. Here it is in its context:

*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.** [our emphasis] 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, that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California. The General Congress of labour at Baltimore (August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1866) declared:*

*"The first and great necessity of the present, to free the labour of this country from capitalistic slavery, is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working-day in all States of the American Union. We are resolved to put forth all our strength until this glorious result is attained."*

It is remarkable that Marx did not perceive as the “first fruit of the Civil War” the mass, egalitarian movement of the newly-freed slaves, joined by thousands of former slaves who had run away to the North and Canada before the war, a movement that created hundreds of large, collective farming communities all over the South, led by former slaves, and including poor whites. No, for Marx and Engels, the first fruit of the Civil War was among Northern industrial workers, who were overwhelmingly white. “The first and great necessity” was not the struggle against racism and for the equality, unity and brother/sisterhood of all workers, but the fight for a law shortening the workday – again, only for industrial workers, overwhelmingly white. Although later communists use the single sentence in bold print in the above quotation as evidence that communism has always been anti-racist, it was not written as part of a scientific analysis of racism; Marx and Engels did not apply their brilliant scientific tools to the plight of black workers. Yes, they were against slavery, but they were saying here that in order for *white* workers to emancipate themselves, slavery needed to be ended. While that is true, it omits any needs of *black* working people, slave or free. Marx *nowhere* sees the need for or calls for unity or equality between black and white, much less for white workers to follow the leadership of the heroic and visionary black revolutionary fighters of that day.

The only other place in volume one of *Capital* where black people are mentioned is in the section describing the vicious ways the capitalists first accumulated their money. This appears in chapter 31:

*The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.*

Here, Marx and Engels use what must be considered a racist description of Africans. The argument that “black-skins” might not have been a racist term in the 1860s would be very hard to sustain, given the deep and widespread racism of Europe at that time. They also used the term “red-skins” to describe Native Americans, but nowhere do they use the term “white-skins” to describe Europeans.

Beyond these two quotes, *there is no analysis of black labor or of racism.*

By pointing out this racism that Marx and Engels inherited from their environment, we may not be saying much that people don’t already know. Most communists realize that Marx and Engels had this weakness in their thinking, but also feel that it was understandable, even excusable, **that it did not affect the accuracy of their analysis of capitalism**, and that later communists fixed the mistake. It is not a part of the general opinion about Marx and Engels that their thinking was marred by racism. It is worth reminding readers again that Marx and Engels lived at the same time that spokespeople within the strong and vocal abolitionist movement were loudly proclaiming the equality of black and white humanity.

In his book about the abolitionist movement, Adam Hochschild writes:



“The abolitionists succeeded because they mastered one challenge that still faces anyone who cares about social and economic justice: drawing connections between the near and the distant. We have long lived in a world where everyday objects embody labor in another corner of the earth. . . . The eighteenth century had its own booming version of globalization, and at its core was the Atlantic trade in slaves and in the goods they produced. But in England itself there were no caravans of chained captives, no whip-wielding overseers on horseback stalking the rows of sugar cane. The abolitionists’ first job was to make Britons understand what lay behind the sugar they ate, the tobacco they smoked, the coffee they drank.” (From *Bury the Chains*)

It was Marx and Engels who taught us that “everyday objects embody labor.” How did they miss the fact that *the very same class of people who had driven European laborers into factories, the very same class of people who were forcing children as young as six years old to work themselves to death in those factories, that very same class of people was simultaneously sending ships around the triangular slave trade route, buying and selling human beings in exchange for the raw materials on which those childish fingers worked themselves raw? That, from the start, capitalism was a global phenomenon, and “at its core was the Atlantic trade in slaves and in the goods they produced?”* The slave trade did not simply provide the capital used to industrialize Europe: the industrial capitalists continued to own or be shareholders in slave ships and slave plantations until slavery was abolished.

It is true that many communists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were strong and militant in fighting racism, which is one of the reasons why capitalist governments hated them so much. However, it is our contention that **because they did not understand the importance of skin color in the class divisions of capitalism, nor the role of black laborers (slave and free) in the struggle against capitalism, Marx and Engels made big mistakes in how they understood capitalism, and therefore in how they proposed to end it.** Said another way, *racism caused them to ignore key, essential data, and therefore their analysis was faulty.*

### Eurocentrism and the Idea that European Industrial Workers Were the Most Advanced Class

The first major writing that Marx and Engels did was called *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848. It set out their main ideas about capitalism and communism. The very first sentence made it clear that their vision was limited to Europe: “A specter [ghost] is haunting Europe; the specter of communism.”

They said that capitalism was a system of the owners of industry (capitalists) exploiting the people who worked in the factories (the proletariat, or industrial working class). They pointed out that most people are workers, and that the labor of the workers is stolen by the bosses (capitalists) to make them rich and powerful. They called this “wage slavery.” They also said that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction, because when hundreds and even thousands of people work together under one roof, the workers will

become class conscious and see that they can overthrow their bosses and run the world without them. Marx and Engels felt that the industrial working class was the most advanced class in the world, and would lead the world to freedom and equality. This conclusion was based on their material role and experience in production, not on their consciousness. They said that, for the first time in history, the masses of oppressed people were in a position not only to rebel (which oppressed people had always done), but also to get rid of oppression and exploitation once and for all, and run the world themselves on a basis of equality, justice, and sharing. (They wrote hundreds of pages explaining these ideas in detail; we are only giving a very simplified outline of some of their main ideas.)

What's wrong with this theory? It failed to "[draw] connections between the near and the distant." It failed to notice that while one hand managed factories in Europe, the other wielded a whip amongst the sugar cane. *It left out most of the working people in the world.* Marx and Engels were only thinking about Europe. At that time, that's where the factories were. The factories in Europe got most of their raw materials from the colonies. But Marx and Engels did not conceive of the people working in the colonies, many of them slaves, as part of the working class, or even part of the capitalist system – even though the same capitalist industries used the products of their labor, and the labor of colonial workers, slave or “free,” was also stolen from them for profit, very often by the self-same capitalists. It is most likely that the reason Marx and Engels did not take most of the world's working people into their analysis was because they did not see them as equal people to European workers. Marx and Engels did not apply their science broadly enough, so they reached the wrong conclusions.

**Because of racism, their analysis only covered the aspect of production made up of white Europeans who worked in factories, which was only approximately 2 to 2.5% of the people then living in the world.**

Marx and Engels recognized that capitalism had already become a world system by the time they wrote the Manifesto. Yet they did not analyze how capitalists made profits from the labor of people whose lives were spent extracting, growing and processing goods for capitalist bosses, because most of those workers were dark-skinned slaves in the Americas or near-slaves in Asia. Many of them (to use a modern term) worked for groups that “contracted out” work from the capitalists, including slave-owning members of African, Asian and North American societies. Others in Europe itself worked on farms in one or another relationship to the owners of the land, and the food eaten by the proletarians came from their labor. After leaving out consideration of the vast majority of the world's oppressed, Marx and Engels concluded that the primary contradiction in the world was between factory owners and factory workers (“the two great classes facing each other”), and that wage workers *alone* were the class that had the historic mission to transform the world and end all oppression and exploitation. The Manifesto ends with the words, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

There are several things that jump out as significant problems here. One is the question:

*how can you make a correct analysis of a world system on the basis of such a tiny minority of the people who were exploited by the capitalist class?* The only answer we can see to that question is *racism*. Marx and Engels concluded that industrial production had transformed the class relations in the world, and therefore factories alone were the place to look for the embryo of the future. They never entertained the notion that something going on outside of Europe could contain the embryo of the future.

The experience of the sugar cane workers who were being deliberately tortured and literally worked to death in the West Indies *by the same capitalists who owned the factories in Europe* – and who were denied even the biological ability to reproduce by exhaustion and lack of food – that experience wasn't part of the equation, nor a part of what Marx and Engels described as the “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” of capitalism in the Manifesto. The working population of the West Indies constantly *declined* through death. The birth rate was almost nil until the legal end of the slave trade (which didn't completely end then), after which some of the workers were allowed enough food to be able to reproduce. The experience of the rubber extractors in the Congo, who worked in chains, had hands cut off for failure to meet production goals, and who were similarly worked to death, *by the same capitalists who owned the factories in Europe* — that experience wasn't considered worthy of inclusion in an analysis of capitalism and its future overthrow. *These facts were very widely known by Europeans because of the mass campaigning of the abolitionist movement.*

The British, just a few decades before the Manifesto was written, sent and lost more soldiers and more money in the campaign to put down *slave rebellions* in the West Indies than they had in fighting the American Revolution. To Marx and Engels that did not say anything about who were the people that had the potential to end capitalism. The fact that an army made up of self-emancipated slaves defeated the armies of Great Britain and of Napoleon in quick succession — to Marx and Engels that did not signify anything about who were the people who had the potential and the *will* to end oppression.

A second problem with Marx' and Engels' theory about industrial workers is that it is based on mechanical materialism: that the way production is organized will lead to revolutionary consciousness. In the Manifesto, they added: with the help of deserters from the ruling class who would bring knowledge to the working class. This is circular reasoning. The concept that theory needs to be brought to workers intrinsically contradicts the theory that workers are the class that will naturally lead revolution *because of their organization in production.*

One of the great contributions that came out of the experience of the Chinese Revolution was the concept that “an idea when grasped by the masses becomes a material force.” In their struggle for egalitarianism after the 1949 revolution, the masses in China tried to rise up and take their country back from the former revolutionaries who were quickly becoming the new capitalists. In that movement, they loudly proclaimed that *moral incentives* should replace material incentives in production and every aspect of life and society. They saw that material incentives and a focus on production had led their revolution to turn into its opposite. They recognized the primary nature of *people's*

*consciousness* as the motive force of history, and the only way to achieve an egalitarian economy and society. Unfortunately, the leadership of this movement betrayed it. The people's only option became a violent one, which they did not have the strength or organization to win. China became the hellhole of exploitation and death that we see now, because this struggle was lost.

While we certainly agree that the material realities of life mold people's thinking and what is possible in a given historic time, we disagree that methods and relations of production *determine* how people think and act. *It is our conclusion that the struggle for egalitarianism, not the economic struggle, is the primary way forward.*

When slaves rebelling at Christmas of 1831 were asked what they were fighting for as they burned down all of western Jamaica's sugar plantations, their answer was "our rights." They weren't fighting over how production was organized. They were fighting to be recognized and respected as EQUAL HUMAN BEINGS, deserving of anything and everything the white plantation owners considered their rights. *We maintain that what motivates people to fight is love for humanity and a deep desire for equality and justice. And those with the most commitment are those whose humanity and equality are least respected and most despised, and for whom justice does not exist in the existing system.*

A third problem with the industrial worker theory is: what Marx and Engels predicted didn't happen. Rather than becoming revolutionary, industrial workers today, particularly in the so-called "first world" countries, are among the most conservative, fearful, racist and anti-unity of all exploited people. Rather than becoming poorer and poorer, they own more property than any other exploited people. They use their organizational strength for reform, not for revolution, and often in selfish and sometimes racist ways. They strive to protect what they have. Of course there are exceptions to this characterization, and it does not negate the fact that they are severely exploited and need revolution, but overall, it is true. Yet for a hundred and fifty years, people who consider themselves followers of Marx have created increasingly convoluted reasoning in order to cling to a theory that has not proven true. Many still maintain that industrial workers are the revolutionary class, and still focus their energies on organizing them, *still considering the poorest and darkest marginal*. Just as Marx and Engels ignored the cane cutters and rubber extractors, many modern Marxists ignore or make secondary the roadside vendors, craftspeople, small farmers, raisers of a half-dozen goats, village shoemakers, etc., who eke out the worst livings in the world and live on hillsides threatened by every rainfall — even though they vastly outnumber those relatively lucky few of our oppressed brothers and sisters who have jobs, get a check every week, have some amount of health care and pension, can afford to own a house, a car, TVs, computers, and send their children to college.

Because England had the most advanced industry at the time, Marx and Engels thought that revolution would happen first in England. They were wrong about that, but they were right about one thing: workers in Europe became very class conscious and joined the communists in large numbers. In fact, working people throughout the world became inspired by these ideas of getting rid of oppression once and for all, and creating an

egalitarian world, without exploitation of man by man. Within a hundred years after Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, there were communist parties in nearly every country in the world, and communist-led revolutions in a huge portion of the Earth.

In 1917, the first communist-led revolution took place – not in England, but in the least industrialized, least industrially advanced part of Europe: Russia. (Actually, most Europeans at the time considered Russians to be Asian semi-barbarians, not “real” Europeans. The Russian language was frowned upon even in Russia itself; the Russian rulers and intellectuals spoke and wrote in French, which was considered a far more refined and sophisticated language.) At the time of the revolution, only a small percentage of Russians were proletarians, according to Marx’s definition; most worked on farms and were called peasants. The industrial workers did play a key role in starting the revolution (along with soldiers), but during the four-year civil war that followed, the great majority of the people who fought and eventually won the revolution were from the countryside.

The next communist-led revolution took place not in Europe at all, but in China, which was a British colony just a few years earlier. China also had a tiny industrial working class. But, following the analysis that said industrial workers should lead, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first organized and led an uprising of industrial workers in the cities in 1927. It was brutally defeated, and in the process many communists were killed. After that, the CCP made a very controversial decision under the leadership of Mao: they left the cities, left the proletariat, and decided to rely on the peasants in the countryside to make the revolution. For twenty-two years, they made war on the old society. They established a free base area behind their battle lines where life was lived by egalitarian principles. In 1949, they finally defeated the enemy and took power in the whole of China.

Marx and Engels were scientists. They analyzed human societies in a scientific way. They developed a theory about capitalism and how to move toward communist egalitarianism. Their theory was then tried in real life. *And as history went forward, it became clear that European industrial workers would not free the world. That just wasn’t the way it was working.* Communist parties have claimed power in the name of the working class, but industrial workers did not actually make or lead the revolutions that happened.

When a scientific experiment does not produce the results that the scientists expected, they try to figure out what was wrong with their thinking and try something different. This is what we need to do now, and to do it we need to examine the history and experience of all of oppressed humanity, not only of European industrial workers. We cannot let loyalty to a theory or to a previous scientist prevent us from realizing that we need to rethink our theory.

Does Capitalism Need to “Fulfill Its Destiny” Before History Can Move Forward?

Before we look at that history, though, we want to examine another flaw in the thinking of Marx and Engels and many communists. In recent decades, others have come to similar conclusions about it as we will present here.

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels say that the capitalist class has played a revolutionary part in history by developing technologically advanced methods of industrial production and organizing masses of workers into it, and that capitalism has drawn even what they called “barbarian” countries into civilization. In our view, they used the word “barbarian” in two meanings: one goes along with the idea that some people were less evolved and “civilized” than Europeans, as we described above. The other has to do with seeing most of the world as less economically advanced (that is, less fully capitalist) than Western Europe. This thinking reflected Marx’ and Engels’ lack of understanding of the international character of capitalism even then, as we pointed out already. Crucially, it also suggests that capitalism must fully develop its ability to produce goods at the highest levels of technology and efficiency before it is possible to make the transition to a more egalitarian type of society (socialism or communism). In other words, according to this idea, there’s no sense trying to make a communist revolution in a “backward” country (which happened to include all the countries where people had dark skin). This goes along with the thought that most people would never even *want* an egalitarian society unless it was in an economy already capable of producing plenty of everything anyone could need or want. (This thinking was behind Marx and Engels proposing two stages of revolution, first socialism, then communism. The socialist stage, in their writing, would not be egalitarian, only the communist stage, which would come much later, when production and people were “ready” for it.)

This idea that the development of *productive forces* was the first order of business led to several dead-end roads in the history of struggle over the last hundred and fifty years. For one thing, it led Marxist revolutionaries in “developing countries” to decide to fight for “national liberation” from the colonial powers *instead of* fighting for communism, based on the idea that they would need to develop a strong, productive, independent capitalist economy first, which would lay the basis for the next step: socialism. Thus the communist movement in colonial countries became tied to *nationalism* instead of *internationalism*. These revolutionaries became the new capitalist class wherever they succeeded, and the revolution stopped there.

Another dead-end was that the communist leadership of both Russia and China had the idea that their first priority must be to increase their industrial production. This made them compromise their egalitarian principles in order to bribe the old capitalists, engineers, etc., to work for them and build up industry. (In China, there was a major movement to oppose this during the Cultural Revolution, but it was turned aside and sold out by its leadership.) This policy also included paying some people more for their work than others, based on how much they produced or how “important” their job was for increasing production. The most “important” jobs ended up being those of members of the communist parties, who then became corrupt. (Of course, we are simplifying major historic issues, but there is not space to deal with them fully here.) This led the

communist-led governments in these countries *also to be tied to nationalism instead of internationalism* – but that discussion is beyond the scope of this document. We will deal with this in another document to come.

Finally, when Russia and China turned back to capitalist economies, the so-called communist leaders (actually sell-outs of communism) in those countries and later others claimed that they were recreating capitalism in their countries because it was necessary in order to build production of goods and services the people need.

There is something fundamentally wrong with the ideas that led to these dead ends, which have caused so much pain, hardship and death to so many people. And what is wrong is directly connected to the reasons Marx and Engels overlooked the experience of Africans in the Americas. *They were thinking that production of goods and services is more important to moving history forward than is the collective thinking and experience of the people. They concluded that the ability for humanity to be organized around principles of egalitarianism was a direct result of the forces of production, which had reached their highest level under capitalism.*

The main problem here is that **people are primary and production is secondary**, not the other way around. *The notion that profit or self-interest is a driving force for the development of society and a necessary step for egalitarian revolution is wrong.* Most of the time humans have been around, they lived by egalitarian principles. If human beings have been on earth for about 200,000 years, as scientists think, then for at least 190,000 years of that time everyone lived in egalitarian groups that collectively gathered and hunted their food, built their homes, took care of their children, and created human culture, including language, art, music, storytelling, theater, games, etc., etc., etc. (Note: this is why we refer to Marx and Engels as the “founders of modern communism,” rather than as the “founders of communism:” humanity has lived by communist principles for most of its existence.) Until some tiny percent of people got the idea and the ability to keep things for themselves at the expense of everyone else, humanity lived by egalitarian principles. *The advent of the profit motive (that is, the development of exploitation and classes) destroyed egalitarianism.* You can make a case that exploitation started a process that resulted in technological changes and the ability to produce greater quantities and types of food and other goods, but you cannot make the case that exploitation started a process that would ultimately allow humans to become egalitarian: *humans were already egalitarian before exploitation started and have always wanted and been capable of egalitarianism.*

Even in much more modern times, there are many examples to show that where the ruling classes are weakest and people are most on their own, they tend to live a more egalitarian lifestyle. For instance, after Reconstruction was brutally crushed in the United States, black people created communities where everyone looked out for and helped each other, shared tools, tended the sick and educated themselves. This tendency also existed in the countryside in old Russia, before the communist revolution, and still exists in many communities, especially rural ones, throughout the world. You also see an egalitarian, humanitarian impulse emerging every time there is a major crisis, from refugee

communities in wartime to earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and snow storms. *People do not need the promise of plenty in order to look out for one another!*

To repeat, the lesson here is that as the moving force of history, *people are primary; production is secondary*. Marx and Engels stood this truth on its head. This was part and parcel of what blinded them to the African struggles for equality in the Americas, and what led them to think that European industrial workers were the most advanced class in the world, the people with the potential to transform the world.

### The Science of Dialectical Materialism and the Importance of Consciousness

The science Marx and Engels refined is called dialectical materialism, and it has survived the test of time. Although Marx' and Engels' predictions did not come true, this was because they did not include all the information they should have in their analysis, not because the scientific method they were using was faulty. Dialectical materialism is still the best way we know to understand the world. The specific problem of Marx and Engels was that they did not apply that science to the experience of dark-skinned peoples. Because they didn't respect the humanity of black and other dark peoples, they failed to see that working class-consciousness, by itself, could not lead to freedom – because European workers could (and often did) become class conscious without becoming anti-racist. The experience of white workers in production allowed them to see that the boss was their enemy, but not that the black slave or oppressed worker in the colonies was part of their class, and certainly not the importance of joining forces behind the egalitarian vision of dark-skinned people. White workers' experience in industry could lead them to fight against capitalism for a better deal for themselves, while at the same time not preparing them to resist being used by those same capitalists against their own brothers and sisters with dark skins. (It is interesting that the abolitionist movement in England, not the Marxists, were able to organize a portion of British workers to oppose slavery, even though sometimes it meant going against their own immediate economic self-interest.)

The people whose experience in production – and life – allowed them to see the essentially equality of all humankind were *and still are* the oppressed people who suffer the direct and immediate effects of racism. The revolutionary activities of early European industrial workers led to Marx' and Engels' economic analysis of capitalism, and to the development of a movement guided by the concept of struggle between workers and owners of industry *over the value produced in production*. The revolutionary activities of black slaves and their supporters resulted in the development of a movement guided by the concept of a struggle *for the equality of all members of the human race*. Put another way, white workers can engage in a fight against their own immediate oppression without fighting for equality (they can't win, but they don't automatically know that). Enslaved and oppressed black folk's fight against their own immediate oppression *is* a fight for egalitarianism. This is what makes them a more revolutionary force than industrial workers are.

The science of dialectical materialism shows us that the material realities of a person's



life give rise to their thinking. By not examining the material realities of the lives of dark-skinned people, Marx and Engels also were ignorant of their thinking at a time when *the thinking of black folk in the Americas was probably the most advanced in the world* about how humanity should organize, fight, and even govern itself.

Let us now examine what we know about the experience and thinking of the black movement in the Americas before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Early African-Led Revolutionary Movement in the Americas

Revolutionaries outside of Europe, even while they guided their actions by Marxist thinking, have often also been angry at the assumption that the world must look to Europe for the most advanced thinking about transforming the world. The arrogance of that assumption began with Marx and Engels themselves. We propose that revolutionary thinkers should face the opposite direction and look outside Europe for the most advanced organizing and thinking about how to transform the world.

If Marx and Engels had been looking outside Europe, they would have seen that the leading struggles for equality going on at the time (at least of which these writers are aware) were those of African slaves in the Americas. Rebellion began with the very beginning of the slave trade and never ceased. Some ran away from their chains, some rebelled, some even fought to take power from the slave owners. In many cases, runaways and rebels established “base areas,” maroon communities, and defended them against the slave-owners’ governments. All these types of struggle happened in every slaveholding country. Some involved just a few people; some included tens of thousands. In most cases they were aware of similar movements in other countries, or were even in contact with them. Most maroons were eventually defeated, or made peace at the cost of principle: they agreed to return future escapees from slavery or help capture them. But many lived and fought with great principle for decades or generations before that happened.

Much of this experience was never documented, because most of the people involved were not literate, or because of the dangers involved in the documentation falling into the wrong hands. What was documented has not influenced the history most of us are taught in school. The historic significance and the influence of this mass freedom movement has been quite deliberately suppressed and hidden; it has been written out of history because it is so dangerous to the two percent that runs the world. An example of the extent of this is the fact that the British sent more troops, far more of whom lost their lives, in their campaign against slave rebellions in the West Indies than they did in the American Revolutionary War.

However, there are some anti-racist historians who have worked hard to dig up this history, especially in the decades since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The authors of this document have committed ourselves to finding it, as well as to organizing further research and holding it up to the light, so everyone can draw lessons from it. Although our knowledge has so far only scratched the surface, here are a few

representative examples of the extent and political depth of the movement:

- In Brazil, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were at least ten major *quilombos*, or maroon communities of escaped slaves. The largest was Palmares, which has been described as an African state inside the territory of Brazil that existed for almost the whole 17<sup>th</sup> century and resisted constant military attack from the Portuguese before it finally was defeated. Thousands of people lived in Palmares, and we know some things about how it was governed, but not a lot. We know there was an elected king and some hierarchy, but also that people who came from many warring “tribes” in Africa lived in harmony there, as well as people born in Brazil of all hues from very black to nearly white, and including Native Amerindians. What were the principles people lived by in Palmares? How did they achieve unity? What was the experience of women there? Jumping ahead to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Brazil saw a tumultuous period of armed uprisings, some of them trying to get better conditions, and others trying to seize power away from the slave owners. In the northern area of Bahia alone, there were nine organized, violent revolts just between 1807 and 1835. It is not an accident that these revolts followed soon after the revolution in Haiti, nor that they coincided with one of the most active periods of slave revolts in the US, Jamaica and elsewhere: Gabriel Prosser in 1800; Nat Turner in 1831; Sam Sharpe in 1831-32 and dozens more. Enslaved people knew what was going on in the world around them.

- In Colombia, there were numerous revolts as well as *palenques* (maroon communities). Many of them were located in the north of the country, near the Caribbean coast, where their descendants still live in a semi-autonomous region. The Palenque at San Basilio was first *defeated* in 1619, but went on to fight again. There was another movement in 1696, and more fighting again in 1713-17, when the Palenque finally made peace, but even after that, they lived an isolated and self-sufficient existence until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, this semi-autonomous region is under attack once again, by international corporations who are violently displacing black people in order to exploit their resources.

- In Jamaica, numerous slave uprisings ended with the Christmas Rebellion (Sam Sharpe) in western Jamaica in 1831-32, in which upwards of 60,000 people took part (one in five of all enslaved Jamaicans). Not surprisingly, slavery was ended in the British Empire two years later. Again, it was no accident that this rebellion coincided with the uprisings in Brazil and the U.S. Jamaica was also home to numerous maroon communities that fought the British until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them were captured and exiled to Nova Scotia, where they again rebelled and forced the British to send them to Sierra Leone, West Africa, where they helped found that country. The descendants of these maroons also still have semi-autonomous control of their own districts today.

- In Mexico, maroons led by Yanga established what is credited as the first free town in the Americas in 1618, in Veracruz. The first documented slave revolt in Mexico was in 1537 (45 years after Columbus’ first voyage), and the influence of African-descended guerilla fighters in the Mexican war for independence no doubt contributed to the fact that the second president of Mexico, who himself was descended from Africans, announced the abolition of slavery in Mexico in 1822.

- In the US there were slave uprisings during the entire history of slavery. It is less well known that there were extensive maroon communities also. The Great Dismal Swamp area along the border between North Carolina and Virginia had hundreds if not thousands of escaped slaves living in it for generations, and was connected to maroon communities throughout the swamplands that ran from there all the way to Florida, where the better known Seminole maroons lived and fought (and whose descendants live in the US west and in Mexico). How did these courageous people organize themselves? We don't yet know. But we do know something about how another set of maroons lived: those who made it all the way to Southern Ontario in Canada. The Elgin Settlement did not need to defend itself militarily, because by the time it began, slaves could no longer legally be brought into Canada. Despite their ability to live in peace, Elgin and nearby communities of escaped slaves were engaged in the struggle against slavery back in the US, producing guns and sending organizers into the South, and later joining the Union army during the Civil War. Elgin was a last stop on the Underground Railroad (UGRR).

The UGRR was a massive organizing project, led in large part by an escaped slave woman named Harriet Tubman, who had a home in another Ontario black community. The UGRR had at least three thousand active members, who did everything from transporting runaways, to hiding them, to defending them against slave catchers, as well as fundraising and other logistical support. For obvious security reasons, this amazing organizing effort, which spanned thousands of miles, was not documented in detail. In addition to the active members, there was mass community involvement in many Northern cities and towns, where on many occasions hundreds of people took up arms to protect runaways and attack and sometimes kill slave catchers.

Elgin (now North Buxton) was just forty-five miles from Detroit, which was a hotbed of anti-slavery mass activism and violent struggle. At Elgin, unlike many maroon communities inside "enemy territory," there was private ownership of property, but that existed alongside a communal spirit. Like other maroons, the small farmers of Elgin collectively built their homes and barns, shared agricultural tools and equipment, and built workshops to make the tools and equipment they needed, from sawmills to seed-planters. They collectively created the clothing and bedding, washing machines and food-preservation they needed to get through winters. Elgin settlers also built a school and created an anti-racist curriculum for it (an activity that was the focus of many free black communities in the US and Canada). Their school was so successful that the local government school had to close its doors because neighboring white parents sent their children to the Elgin school for its superior education. Meanwhile, a few miles away in Chatham, escaped slaves were making guns. It was in Chatham that the meeting was held which planned the guerrilla war against slavery that almost started at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, led by John Brown. When slavery ended in the US, about two-thirds of the people in Chatham and Elgin returned to their former homes to help in the Reconstruction effort, bringing their skills, their ideas, and their organizing experience with them. It is significant to note that thousands of descendants of this community return to Ontario each Labor Day weekend to celebrate and study the activities of their ancestors.

We need more research. It would appear from what has been unearthed so far that most maroon communities were not models of egalitarianism. Many seem to have had collective rather than private ownership of property, but also to have been top down and militaristic, copying the organization of society they had known in Africa, which included kings and slaves. Most eventually accepted peace in exchange for hunting and returning new escapees from slavery. There are many references to maroons kidnapping women. However, we also must realize that the history we know about was not written by the maroons themselves, and was often written by people participating in hunting them. So we still find ourselves with many questions: what were the principles they lived by while they were fighting? What was their long-term view about the type of society they wanted to build in peacetime? Did they kidnap women, or liberate them? How did their communities treat women?

In addition, most history as written even by sympathetic historians, makes several typical errors. For example, most historians don't look at what women were doing, and assume men were leaders. What has gone down as "Gabriel Prosser's" rebellion in Virginia had a three-person collective planning and leading it: Gabriel Prosser was one of them, but another was a woman. Many historians recorded that rebel leaders had been kings in Africa. How much of this is true, and how much reflects the bias of both the reporters and historians, who thought that leaders must have been "better" than the masses of "average" slaves? Historians tend to accept the idea that individuals make history – especially "exceptional" individuals. For example, Sam Sharpe is credited with leading the Christmas Rebellion in Jamaica. When you stop and think about it, one person could not lead 60,000 rebels. There must have been organizing committees on top of organizing committees; there must have been organizers whose main job was communication and coordination. Who were those organizers? What were they thinking? What were their goals? How many women were among them? The idea that one guy "inspired" everyone to rise up simultaneously and just fight blindly against their slave masters, with no thought of how or for what end, is racist nonsense. The slave owners showed that they were certain about this: after they put down the rebellion, they executed hundreds of rebels for being organizers – people who represented highly valuable "property" to them. We must admit that there is a huge amount of history that we just don't know, mainly because no one with the capacity to record it thought it worth recording.



However, we do know a little more in depth about one aspect of the North American experience, so we will now describe that in a bit more detail. The communities in the northern United States and in Canada did document some of their experience and thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We suspect that as more information about the rest of the Americas comes into our knowledge, we will discover parallels and similarities between the North Americans and the black-led movement in other countries.

A Case Study: the Chatham – Elgin – Underground Railroad - Harper’s Ferry  
Contributions to Egalitarian Theory

In reading about slave rebellions in Brazil, we find that a few of them were described as struggles for power, not only against slavery. A similar thing happened as a result of the slave rebellion/abolitionist/Underground Railroad/maroon movement in the U.S. and Canada. There was a plan to raid the Harper’s Ferry arsenal and take the weapons into the mountains to set up base areas to make war on slavery. This plan took the maroon and anti-slavery experience a step further: into offensive warfare against the slave owners and their government, with the goal of establishing a free state with its own, egalitarian government.

The Harper’s Ferry raid has gone down in the history books as the brainchild of John Brown, the white revolutionary who was its military commander. Unfortunately, even anti-racist historians have described it that way, giving in to two wrong ideas: one, that individuals make history, and two, that white individuals in particular make history. The reality is that Harper’s Ferry was the result of a complex history of decades of black-led struggle.

Beginning in 1831, national black conventions were held to discuss, plan and implement methods of freeing black people in the U.S. (slave and “free” alike). There is documentation of many of these, and the abolitionist movement (which, again, tends to be recorded as led by William Lloyd Garrison, a white man who attended and was inspired by the 1831 convention) was born in them. From this documentation, we can see that a wide spectrum of ideas and plans was considered. They researched and discussed origins of racism. They sent delegates to various parts of the world, including Cuba, Jamaica and West Africa, to look into the viability of establishing maroon communities there where black Americans, slave and “free,” could go to put the racist US entirely behind them. These and other ideas were sharply debated.

They did not, to our knowledge, however, write down their discussions and plans about illegal activities, such as helping slaves to escape, organizing against slavery in the South, or armed struggle. But we can find reference to all of these things if we look carefully. For example, three of the black men involved in the Harper’s Ferry planning are described as being members of a secret black paramilitary organization. Another black participant in the meeting that approved the final plan is described as having recently returned from organizing in the South. (These facts were uncovered by W.E.B. DuBois.) Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad organization had black, white and Native

American organizers throughout the South and the North. When slave catchers appeared in places like Ohio and Michigan, there were organizations already existing in those communities that were able to mobilize hundreds of armed people to attack the slave catchers within hours. There is plenty of evidence of serious, ongoing organizing, planning, philosophical discussion and armed struggle just by reading between the lines of research that has already been done.

The Harper's Ferry plan was officially approved at a meeting in Chatham, Ontario in 1858. John Brown was in attendance, along with ten other white men who had fought alongside him against slavery in Kansas. The other thirty-three men at the meeting, including all of the leadership of it, were black. This meeting approved a document called the "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." The raid on Harper's Ferry was the first action taken under the rule of this Constitution, which provided the organizing principles for the society that would be started in the mountains by the guerilla warriors after they took the weapons from the Harper's Ferry arsenal. Historians say that John Brown wrote the Provisional Constitution all by himself, but once again, this is such a simplification as to distort the truth. Brown did present it to the Chatham meeting, but its content is the result of the experience and ideological discussions that had been taking place within the anti-slavery movement for decades. Brown's own actions show that he was in substantial disagreement with a few key parts of it, which we will describe later on.

The Provisional Constitution is the clearest example we know about so far that helps us to see the type of thinking going on within the black-led movement that Marx and Engels ignored. It is a remarkable document. Let us look at some of its key points. To start with, it is worth reading the whole Preamble:

*Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion - the only conditions of which are perpetual imprisonment and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination - in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence:*

*Therefore, we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions.*

This Preamble is an assertion of **the equality and unity of all oppressed people**. The "self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence" refer to these words in that document, which was written in 1776 when the US colonies declare their independence from England: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among

these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” The writers of the Declaration were slave owners, so their definition of “men” did not include black people or women, but the Provisional Constitution clearly claimed equality of all people. The second paragraph of the Preamble puts citizens of the US, black people, slave and free, and all other oppressed people into one category of people who are setting out principles to govern their lives and defend themselves. “The oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect” are black people. The decision referred to is the Dred Scott decision of 1857, which used those words. “All other people degraded by the laws thereof” is a very broad description, which we can safely assume to include women, Native Americans and poor people in general, all of whom were degraded by the laws of the US.

Some of the provisions of the Constitution are worth highlighting here.

- All officials would be elected for three years, but could be removed sooner for “misconduct.” The idea of immediate recall of government officials was a lesson Marxism learned from the Paris Commune years later, though it was not implemented by communist-led governments.
- Voters are defined as “*all mature people of sound mind.*” The word “people” is used, not the word “men.” At that time there was a struggle going on for women’s right to vote, and that struggle was led by people who were also involved in the abolitionist movement. The use of the word “people” was a declaration that women would vote equally with men in the new society. (This is one area where John Brown disagreed with the Constitution. He even opposed allowing women to attend the Chatham meeting. Several of the black leaders of that meeting had proposed that it be open to women, but Brown opposed the proposal and the others deferred to him.)
- “*No person connected with this organization shall be entitled to any salary, pay, or emolument, other than a competent support of himself and family.*” This was to guarantee that no one would be able to get rich from being a member of the community or its government, a very egalitarian position at the time (and again, a lesson Marx drew from the later Paris Commune in France). (John Brown’s actions showed disagreement with this principle as well: he hired Hugh Forbes for a lot of money – far more than “competent support” – to get his expertise in planning the raid. Forbes took the money and ratted on the organization, which forced a lengthy postponement of the raid and caused a number of influential people to lose confidence Brown.)
- “*All captured or confiscated property and all property the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization and of their families, shall be held as the property of the whole, equally, without distinction, and may be used for the common benefit, or disposed*

*of for the same object.*” This is very near to the essence of communism: all property to be held in common and used for the common benefit. This ordinance goes way beyond what the constitutions of the USSR and China provided when the communist-led movements took power in those countries in the next century.

- Everyone must work: *“All persons connected in any way with this organization, and who may be entitled to full protection under it, shall be held as under obligation to labor in some way for the general good; and persons refusing or neglecting so to do, shall, on conviction, receive a suitable and appropriate punishment.”* If you put together this point and the one before it, you are pretty close to the communist motto of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need,” long before it was conceived or written by Marx.

- Arm the entire adult population: *“All persons known to be of good character and of sound mind and suitable age, who are connected with this organization, whether male or female, shall be encouraged to carry arms openly.”* This idea appears in communist thinking several decades later as part of planning towards the transition to communism, but not to be implemented right away. Women bearing arms was a very radical concept.

- There were several items that could be described as enforcing a humane society, such as treating prisoners with “respect and kindness,” including the death penalty for raping female prisoners (*“Persons convicted of the forcible violation of any female prisoner shall be put to death”*); no needless waste of useful property by burning it or killing animals; and intelligence offices to be set up to help families of slaves reunite. Chinese communists implemented many of these concepts and documented them as principles of people’s war, several generations later, though not the death penalty for rape.

We have gone into some detail about the contents of the Provisional Constitution, because it demonstrates so clearly the kind of thinking going on within the black-led movement in the Americas during the same time that communist theory was developing in Europe. We believe that this Constitution is unique only in that it was published and is still easy to find, but we strongly suspect that the type of thinking and strategizing that was going on in the US and Canada was also happening in Central and South America and the Caribbean during that time period.

It is also notable that this document and many others coming out of the US anti-slavery movement were available to Marx and Engels, if they had thought them worthy of their investigation.

Did the Communist Manifesto influence the Provisional Constitution? The answer appears to be “no.” The Manifesto was written ten years earlier, and could have been read by some of the American writers, but its influence is not evident. The Constitution does not use the class-conscious language of the Manifesto; nor does the Manifesto set out any plan for what would replace capitalism, which what the Constitution is about. On the other hand, Marx and Engels continued writing and building a revolutionary movement for decades after the Provisional Constitution was written. Did they read it?



That answer also appears to be “no.” There is no evidence in their further writings that it influenced them. It would be interesting to compare the Provisional Constitution with Marx’s conclusions about the experience of the Paris Commune, when the working class of Paris took over the city and ran it for several months in 1871 before being brutally defeated. The lessons Marx drew from the Commune became essential aspects of communist theory used by later revolutionaries, but the document he and Engels wrote about it does not mention the Provisional Constitution of the Harper’s Ferry raiders. In some ways, the ideas of the Provisional Constitution were more revolutionary and more egalitarian than those of the Paris Commune, particularly about the equality of people of all hues, and of men and women.

### Who Should Lead?

There is another profound lesson to be learned from the Harper’s Ferry experience: *the need for black leadership*. Despite laying down his life in the struggle against slavery, John Brown’s mistakes led to the defeat of the brilliant egalitarian vision that guided him and his fellow raiders. His refusal to include women undoubtedly weakened the struggle in ways we can only guess at. The Hugh Forbes betrayal cost the confidence of influential people who helped arm and financially support the operation, and possibly part of the element of surprise. But his concern for the safety of white hostages and civilians in Harper’s Ferry was the tactical error that delayed the raiding party from taking the weapons and moving immediately into the mountains. Instead of moving quickly, which would have endangered white civilians and hostages, Brown accompanied hostages to their homes (and back) to reassure their families of their safety! Clearly, had black members of the raiding party eager to free enslaved family members been in command, this error would not have been made. This delay allowed the US military to surround and defeat the raid. (A black member of the raiding party, Osborne Perry Anderson, lived to document this history.)

Marx said industrial workers would lead the revolution because he believed that those most oppressed and exploited by capitalism were the ones with the insight, commitment and power to defeat it and build a new world. We think the principle was correct, but he was mistaken about who those people are. **Our movement needs the leadership of those people whose struggle against oppression is the struggle for equality, because equality is the essence of communism. It is not industrial workers that we need to lead the movement; it is the poorest, darkest, most oppressed people of the world, particularly women.**

We should remember that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were not prehistoric days. Communication was already global by then. People were aware of what was happening in the far reaches of the globe. Communication may not have been as fast as it is now (although by the time of Marx, Harper’s Ferry, the US Civil War, and the Paris Commune, the telegraph was in wide use and moved information instantaneously), but it happened. Both Europeans and black folk all over the Americas knew about the American, French and Haitian Revolutions, and news of slave rebellions spread like wildfire. A Jamaican (Boukman) was one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution.

Cuban maroons had a regular trade with Jamaica. The US and British anti-slavery movements were in regular communication, and black North and South Americans were traveling to a variety of countries and making contacts with supporters there. Slaves escaped to Canada and then sent organizers back to the southern US. *Marx had access to this information.*

### Conclusions

The revolutionary movement should use the knowledge and science of Marxism, but must be willing to criticize and move beyond Marx.

Marx lived in a time when racism was virulent. Marx lived in a time when there was a massive, inspired, creative, revolutionary movement of black peoples in the Americas. Marx lived in a time when there was a huge, public, multiracial anti-slavery movement in North America and Europe, with an anti-racist ideology that called for the recognition of the equality of black people. *Marx did not recognize racism* for what it was nor try to analyze it. Marx did not advocate the necessity of an anti-racist movement. *Marx did not call for the recognition of the equality of black people or for unity of white workers with black.* In his analysis of capitalism, Marx did not even recognize that the European capitalists were also the slave traders and slave owners of the Americas (with a slight variation in the United States).

As a result of his racism, Marx's conclusion that European industrial workers would lead the movement to free humanity was wrong. Even at the time Marx was writing, it was dark-skinned people outside of Europe and outside of the factories who had the most advanced ideas and did the most advanced organizing around egalitarian principles. We believe this is still the case.

**In view of the evidence, we suggest that it will be the poorest and darkest among us, especially women, who will lead the movement to free humanity. We believe that the role of revolutionaries is to support and argue for poor, dark-skinned people to be in the forefront of the struggle. We propose that, to be true servants of the people, revolutionaries should organize in the countryside and in the cities with their main focus on teaching the poorest and darkest, especially women, to be our leaders. We propose that humanity is ready NOW to build egalitarian organizations and communities, and to prepare to defend them against the attacks of the capitalist forces. We should not wait for the seizure of state power to go to the “next stage” of the struggle. The “next stage” is *now*.**

It is not necessary to “win people over” to egalitarian principles before we can move forward. We suggest that there is already an unspoken consensus for egalitarianism among humanity's most oppressed. The role of revolutionaries is to bring it to light, organize and implement it.

Just as the Harper's Ferry raid would have been more likely to succeed had it been led by the black members of the raiding party, so the international, multiracial movement we

build today needs to be led by the section of society that has the most profound commitment to equality: the poorest and darkest among us, especially women.

The struggle for an egalitarian world is not about productive forces or how production is organized; it is about the essential human commitment to equality and justice. As the Chinese communists said, “an idea when seized by the masses becomes a material force.” That idea is egalitarianism. Let’s help the masses seize it!

#### Addendum:

The writers of this statement are painfully aware of its limitations. We are aware that, just as Marx’ and Engels’ theories came up short in the crucible of history, so might these. We are convinced that we and others need to do much more to understand the interrelationship of class and hue within capitalism. We are likewise convinced by our experience in organizing that we need the leadership of women, and that much work is yet to be done to understand that crucial dynamic within the struggle for egalitarianism. Our dearth of knowledge and analysis of other parts of the world, especially Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands is also evident in this statement.

We beg those readers who, in their hearts, are committed to organizing an egalitarian future, and are willing to question all theories, including those presented here, to join the struggle to put these theories into practice so that we may test them, change them, correct them, and eventually see a vibrant, international movement that can destroy all inequality and allow humanity to live in freedom.

#### Contact Information

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