Marx/Engels and Racism

By W. H. Chaloner & W. O. Henderson

While scholars on the Continent have long been aware of the fact that Karl Marx held anti-Semitic views, the same cannot generally be said of their colleagues in England and America.

Marx was a Jew; and when he was growing up in Trier, he was treated as second-class citizens and excluded from certain professions. No Jew could hold a position in the Prussian army or practice as a lawyer at the bar. To continue as a member of the legal profession Marx’s father became a Christian and was baptised by a Lutheran army chaplain. As a boy Marx realised that he was different from his fellows. He had been baptised, but he was “a Jew by race” and suffered from the anti-Semitism prevalent in Germany in his day. His reaction to the situation was an extraordinary one. He ranged himself with the anti-Semites and denounced his own people in a most violent fashion.¹

His attitude towards the Jews was made clear in two articles which he wrote in 1843 at the age of 25. They were reviews of a book and an article by Bruno Bauer on the Jewish question, and they appeared in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher (published in Paris in 1844).² Marx regarded capitalism, as operated by the middle classes, as inherently evil; and he argued that Jewish money-making activities lay at the very heart of the obnoxious capitalist system. The following extracts from Marx’s articles indicate his point of view on the Jewish question in his day.

“What is the worldly raison d’être of Jewry [Judaism]? The practical necessity of Jewry is self-interest.”

In 1845, in The Holy Family, Marx claimed that in his articles in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher he had “proved that the task of abolishing the essence of Jewry is in truth the task of abolishing Jewry in civil society, abolishing the inhumanity of today’s practice of life, the summit of which is the money system.” In 1849 an article in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung (of which Marx was the editor) criticised the notion that Jews living in Prussia’s Polish provinces should be regarded as Germans. The article declared that these Jews were “the filthiest of all races.” “Neither by speech nor by descent—but only by their greed for profit”—can they be looked upon as relatives of the Germans in Frankfurt.” One of Marx’s critical biographers has remarked: “this solution of the Jewish question was not very different from Adolf Hitler’s, for it involved the liquidation of Jewry...”³

There are numerous uncomplimentary references to Jews in Karl Marx’s letters to his close
friend Friedrich Engels in the 1850s and 1860s. At that time Marx was living in London and his earnings as a free-lance journalist—he was a regular contributor to the New York Daily Tribune—were quite insufficient for his needs. Engels, then employed as a clerk by the firm of Ermen & Engels in Manchester, sent him small remittances whenever he could. Even so Marx failed to make ends meet and—when there was nothing more to pledge at the pawnbrokers—he borrowed money from anyone who would lend it. He had many dealings with Jewish financial agents in the City of London. The Bambergers (father and son), as well as Stiebel and Spielmann, were German Jews whose names frequently crop up in the Marx-Engels correspondence. Marx made use of the Jews to raise small loans and to discount bills of exchange received from Charles A. Dana (editor of the New York Tribune) in advance payment of articles which Marx had agreed to write. Marx complained bitterly that the Jews would not discount his bills until confirmation from Dana had been received; and he was furious when they pressed him to honour debts due for repayment. Marx showed his contempt by always referring to them as “Jew [or “little Jew”] Bamberger” and “Jew Spielmann”; or by imitating the nasal twang characteristic of the way in which some Jews from Eastern Europe spoke German. Yet Marx had cause to regret the day when the Bambergers were not in business in London any more and were no longer available to discount his bills of exchange. In 1859 he wrote to Engels: “It is the devil of a nuisance that I have no Bamberger in London any more....”

Marx’s anti-Semitism may be illustrated by examining his attitude towards Ferdinand Lassalle, who was a Jew from Breslau in Silesia. As a young man Lassalle had led the workers of Düsseldorf during the revolution of 1848. But he had never been a member of the Communist League, since his application to join the Cologne branch had been turned down; and he had taken no part in the risings in Germany in 1849 in support of the Frankfurt constitution, since he had been in jail at that time. Consequently in the 1850s, while nearly all the former supporters of the revolution were either in prison or in exile, Lassalle was able to live in Düsseldorf, without being unduly molested by the authorities. It was to Marx’s advantage to keep in touch with Lassalle, who gave him news of the underground workers’ movement in the Rhineland. And through his aristocratic connections—he was a close friend of the Countess of Hatzfeld—he was sometimes able to provide Marx with useful political information which he could use in articles contributed to the New York Tribune and Die Presse. But while Marx regarded himself as the head of a great political movement who should be obeyed by his followers, Lassalle declined to be a mere disciple and was determined to be a leader of the German workers in his own right.

The correspondence between Marx and Lassalle suggests that the two men were colleagues who—despite certain differences of opinion—were collaborating to achieve a common aim. But the letters exchanged between Marx and Engels tell a very different story. Here Marx showed his contempt for the Jew who presumed to have opinions and ambitions of his own. When Lassalle was Marx’s guest in London in 1862 Marx wrote to Engels:

“It is now perfectly clear to me that, as the shape of his head and the growth of his hair indicate, he is descended from the negroes who joined in the flight of Moses from Egypt (unless his mother or grandmother on the father’s side was crossed with a nigger). Now this union of Jewishness to Germaness on a negro basis was bound to produce an extraordinary hybrid. The importance of the fellow is also niggerlike.”

Marx referred to his guest as a “Jewish nigger” who was “completely deranged.” He frequently used derogatory epithets when writing about Lassalle, such as “Itzig” (Ikey), “Ephraim...
and jobbing of securities... Their business is to watch the monies available for investment and keenly observe where they lie. Here and there anywhere that a little capital courts investment, there is ever one of these little Jews ready to make a little suggestion or place a little bit of a loan. The smartest highwayman in the Abruzzi is not better posted about the locale of the hard cash in a traveller's valise or pocket, than these Jews about any loose capital in the hands of a trader.

Marx went on to attack the Jewish finance houses of Königswarter, Raphael, Stern, Bischoffsheim, Rothschild, Mendelssohn, Bleichröder, Fould and many others. He declared that many of these families were linked by marriage and he observed that the loan-mongering Jews derive much of their strength from these family relations, as these, in addition to their lucrative affinities, give a compactness and unity to their operations which ensure their success.

Marx concluded his article as follows:

“This Eastern war is destined at all events to throw some light upon this system of loan-mongering as well as other systems. Meanwhile the Czar will get his fifty millions, and let the English journals say what they please, if he wants five hundred more, the Jews will dig them up. Let us not be too severe upon these loan-mongering gentry. The fact that 1835 years ago Christ drove the Jewish money changers out of the temple, and that the money-changers of our age enlisted on the side of tyranny happen again chiefly to be Jews, is perhaps no more than a historical coincidence. The loan-mongering Jews of Europe do only on a larger and more obnoxious scale what many others do on one smaller and less significant. But it is only because the Jews are so strong that it is timely and expedient to expose and stigmatise their organisation.

There was a kind of bitter justice in the fact that Marx, who detested his own race, should have suffered from the anti-Semitic views of others. There were those who attacked Marx because he was a Jew and who branded the political movement that he led as a Jewish conspiracy.

Hope & Co. of Amsterdam played an important role in placing the Russian loan. This was not a Jewish firm, but Marx declared that the Hopes lend only the prestige of their name; the real work is done by Jews, and can only be done by them, as they monopolise the machinery of the loan-mongering mysteries by concentrating their energies upon the barter-trade in securities, and the changing of money and negotiating of bills in a great measure arising therefrom. Take Amsterdam, for instance, a city harbouring many of the worst descendants of the Jews whom Ferdinand and Isabella drove out of Spain, and who, after lingering while in Portugal, were driven thence also, and eventually found a safe place of retreat in Holland. In Amsterdam alone they number not less than 35,000, many of whom are engaged in this gambling
In 1881 Eduard Bernstein sent Engels some examples of anti-Semitic propaganda in Germany. Engels replied that he had never seen anything so stupid or childish. He praised the Sozial-Demokrat—the leading socialist paper in Germany at the time of Bismarck’s Anti-Socialist Law—for coming out firmly against anti-Semitism. Engels quoted with approval a passage from a letter which he had recently received from a Jewish correspondent (Carl Hirsch), who had just been to Berlin. Hirsch had written that “the official press which prints anti-Semitic articles has few readers.”

“While it is true that the Germans have a natural antipathy towards the Jews, it is also a fact that the working class, the radical petty bourgeoisie, and the middle-class philistines hate the government far more than they hate the Jews.”

Bernstein, however, disagreed with Hirsch and claimed that anti-Semitic propaganda was falling upon fertile soil in Germany as far as civil servants, teachers, craftsmen, and peasants were concerned.

Ten years later Engels wrote to August Bebel that he was glad to learn that new Jewish recruits were joining the German Social Democratic Party. But he warned Bebel that socialists would have to keep a watchful eye on these Jewish colleagues because they were cleverer than the average bourgeois socialist and were—owing to centuries of oppression—in the habit of pushing themselves forward.

Although Engels disapproved of anti-Semitism and welcomed Jews like Karl Kautsky and Alfred Adler as party colleagues, he did criticise particular Jews and groups of Jews. For example, in a comment on English politics in 1852 he contemptuously dismissed Disraeli as a “Jewish swindler.” A few years later when he wished to express his disapproval of Lassalle’s conduct, he referred to him as “a real Jew from the Slav frontier” and as “a greasy Jew disguised under brilliantine and flashy jewels.” In 1862, in a letter to Carl Siebel, he attacked the Jewish members of a German club (the Schiller Anstalt) in Manchester. He declared that he seldom visited this veritable “Jerusalem Club” any more because the noisy behaviour of the Jews inconvenienced other members.

“A few years later, however, when he was President of the Schiller Anstalt, Engels played a leading part in securing the larger premises that the Jewish members desired.

In 1864, during the crisis in the Lancashire cotton industry at the time of the American Civil War, Engels complained of the vexations that he had to endure in the office of Ermen & Engels because of “Jewish chicaneries.” In October 1867, and again in May 1868, Engels complained that his time was being wasted by visits from “that damned old Jew” Leibl Choras, who was a refugee from Moldavia where the Jews were being persecuted. Engels obviously had little sympathy for Leibl Choras. And in 1870 Engels dismissed Leo Frankel as “a real little Yid.”

In 1892 in a letter to the French socialist leader Paul Lafargue—Marx’s son-in-law—Engels even expressed a certain sympathy for the anti-Jewish movement in France. He wrote:

“I begin to understand French anti-Semitism when I see how many Jews of Polish origin with German names intrude themselves everywhere to the point of arousing public opinion in the ville lumièrè, of which the Parisian philistine is so proud and which he believes to be the supreme power in the universe.”

Engels also expressed his contempt for the Polish Jews who, in his view, “caricatures of Jews.” He wrote to Laura Lafargue:

“Business principle of the Polish Jew to ask much so as to be able to rebate, for instance:

“How much is a yard of this cloth?”

“15 groschen.”

“He says 15, he means 12½, he would take 10, and the cloth is worth 7½. I am prepared to pay 5 so I will offer him 2½ groschen.”

Just as Engels rarely showed any antipathy towards the Jews, so he had no prejudices against coloured peoples. He rejected the view commonly expressed by explorers and missionaries in his day that native peoples were “heathen savages” who were obviously inferior to white races. Indeed he argued that primitive peoples were superior to modern Europeans because they did not recognise private property, or capitalism, or the state. In 1884 in his book on The Origin of the Family—based upon the researches of the American anthropologist L. H. Morgan—Engels gave a lyrical account of the “wonderful child-like simplicity” of the way of life in the Iroquois Indian tribes.

“Everything runs smoothly without soldiers, gendarmes, or police; without nobles, kings, governors, prefects, or judges, without prisons, without trials. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the whole body of those concerned. The household is run in common and communally by a number of families, the land is tribal property.”
only the small gardens being temporarily assigned to the households. Not a bit of our extensive and complicated machinery of administration is required. There can be no poor or needy—
the communist household and the gens know their obligations towards the aged, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are free and equal—
including the women. There is, as yet, no room for slaves nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of alien tribes. 

As an admirer of primitive races, Engels (like Marx) was strongly opposed to the exploitation of native peoples by white colonists. He denounced the expansion of the empires of European states in India, Java, Algiers and elsewhere. For Marx and Engels the rising in India in 1857 was no mere mutiny of Sepoy troops but a national revolt against the English oppressors. In a series of articles in the New York Tribune they analysed the causes and events of the Mutiny, which they regarded as an illustration of the “general disaffection exhibited against English supremacy on the part of the great Asiatic nations.”

In view of Engels’s attitude towards the Jews, the Iroquois, and the natives in colonial territories, his attitude towards some of the Slavs is difficult to understand. When a Pan-Slav movement developed with Russian support in central and eastern Europe during the revolution of 1848 Engels rejected the demands of the Czechs, Serbs, Croats, and Ruthenians for independence from Habsburg or Turkish rule. Early in 1849 (in two articles in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung) he argued that these peoples had no natural capacity for self-government and were for ever doomed to be ruled by more advanced nations. They were “peoples without any history.” Engels asserted that these peoples would always be subject races and would “never achieve national independence.” They are peoples who have already lost foreign rule when they

entered into the first primitive phase of civilisation or who were actually forced into the earlier phase of civilisation by their foreign masters. In the true spirit of Pan-Germanism, Marx and Engels considered the Czechoslovakians and the South Slavs to be “ethnic trash.”

Two things emerge from this study. The first is the extent to which Marx’s anti-Semitism has been played down, or even ignored, in some popular socialist accounts of Marx’s career and doctrines published in the West and intended for radical and socialist consumption. Thus, readers of Franz Mehring’s Karl Marx (first published in English translation in 1936) will find little to enlighten them on Marx’s anti-Semitism. There may not be exactly a conspiracy of silence but attention may be drawn to the fact that there is a difference between telling the truth and telling the whole truth. Deception by omission is still deception. Western commentators, too, with a few honourable exceptions, have tended to dodge the issue or to gloss over unwelcome facts. Scholars unfamiliar with the German language who rely only upon English translations of the writings of Marx and Engels may be led astray if they use selections compiled by Marxists who are prepared to suppress evidence which might display their hero in a somewhat unfavourable light.

The second point is the striking contrast between Marx’s benevolent desire to liberate the toiling masses from the tyranny of their capitalist exploiters and his fierce attacks upon those who appeared to stand in the way of his messianic hopes—the “idiotic” peasants and the “rapacious” Jews for example. Long after Marx’s death his followers in Soviet Russia were acting quite in accordance with their master’s views when they eliminated the kulaks and persecuted the Jews.


Yet even in West Germany an attempt is apparently being made to counter this realistic view. There has recently been published in Hamburg a selection of Marxist pronouncements on the Jewish question (but omitting Marx’s “Zur Judenfrage” of 1844 on the grounds that it is “easily accessible”—see: Marxisten gegen Antisemitzismus (Hoffmann & Campe, 1974), with heavily pro-Marxist introductions by Iring Fetscher and Ilse Yago-Jung. One wonders whether a more appropriate title for this volume might not have been Marxisten gegen Judenentum und Zionismus.


A small colony of Bambergers can be traced in the City of London during the mid-1850s, based on King Street, Snowhill. Zacharias Bamberger (of 19 King Street, ship and commission agents) was a partner in the firm of Prager & Bamberger, 84 Lower Thomas Street, while Louis Bamberger and Co., merchants, and Abraham Bamberger and Co., wholesale boot manufacturers, both operated from 20 King Street, Snowhill. See: Kelly & Co., Post Office London Directory (1855), p. 813. Of these Zacharias Bamberger seems most likely to have been Marx's money-lender.

5 See Marx to Engels, 31 July 1851, in Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Part iii, Vol. 1, p. 224; and 21 January 1852, p. 444.

6 For example: "Spiegman always sends one away with the nasal Jewish remark 'Kaine Noots da' [i.e., Kaine Noitz da];" Marx to Engels, 18 August 1853 in Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Part iii, Vol. 1, p. 492.

7 The word Yiddish, used to describe this form of speech, is noted as first appearing in print in English in the mid-1880s (Oxford English Dictionary).


12 Marx to Engels, 10 February 1865 ("Jud Horn") and 14 November 1868 ("Rabbi A. Einhorn generally known by the name of A. E. Horn") in Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Part iii, Vol. 3, p. 233; and Vol. 4, p. 24.

13 Marx to Engels, 14 April and 8 July 1870 ("little Jew Leo Frankel") in Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Part iii, Vol. 4, pp. 302, 338.


17 See, for example, Edward von Mühlen-Telling, Vorgeschmack in die künftige deutsche Diktatur von Marx und Engels (1850).

18 For the attitude of socialists to the Jews, see E. Silbemer, Sozialisten zur Judenfrage (1942) and George Liebknecht, "Socialism and the Jews," in Dissent (New York), July-August 1968.


20 Engels to a correspondent in Vienna, 19 April 1890, in Marx/Engels, Werke, Vol. XXII, p. 49. See, however, Engels' 1892 preface to the London edition of his Conditions of the Working Class in England (1845), where he refers to "the pettifogging business tricks of the Polish Jew, the representative in Europe of commerce at its lowest stage" (p. 360 in 1971 edition by Henderson & Chaloner).


26 Engels to Marx, 11 October 1867 and 6 May 1868, in Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, Part iii, Vol. 3, pp. 432 and Vol. 4, p. 52. It has not proved possible to identify Choros further.


29 Engels to Paul Ernst, 5 June 1890, in Engels Profile, p. 190.


32 For selections of articles and letters written by Marx and Engels on colonization, see Marx/Engels, On Colonisation (Moscow) and The First Indian War of Independence, 1857-1859 (Moscow; London, 1960).