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Our history

# The roots of Karl Marx's anti-colonialism

- Features -

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**Through his relationship with the Chartist radical and labor poet Ernest Jones, Karl Marx came to realize the necessity of opposing slavery and colonialism in ending capitalism.**

In his film *The Young Karl Marx*, director Raoul Peck features a scene where an anonymous Frenchman of African descent makes a heartfelt intervention during one of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's outdoor speeches in Paris. [1] Contrasting with the crowd of laborers gathered around him, the elegantly dressed, top-hatted black gentleman briefly interrupts the famous orator to urge him to speak of liberty not only for artisans, whose crafts were increasingly threatened by industry, but also for the underclass of proletarians "the navvies, the mechanics, the smelters!" he exclaims. Marx and his life partner and co-thinker, Jenny, are sitting next to the *citoyen de couleur*, both looking delighted by his critical remark to the father of French anarchism.

The scene is memorable, to be sure, for it is not Marx but a black person "who was tied perhaps directly or by ancestry to colonialism and slavery" who exhorts Proudhon to hold a conception of the working class inclusive of the factory proletariat. The discussion in the scene never turns explicitly to the question of the racialized and enslaved proletarians of the colonial world. Implicitly, however, it does. Because through his black character Peck reminds us that Marx was then living in and thinking from the heart of a colonial empire, with overseas possessions still dominated by racial slavery, and that this larger context inexorably shaped the composition of the working class in the metropolitan core.

Yet in the film as in history, the Parisian Marx was not yet preoccupied intellectually and politically with colonialism and slavery. Peck, therefore, does not make his Marx go talk to the black interlocutor, with whom he clearly shared the same outlook, but to Proudhon, of whom he was highly critical.

This colonial blind spot that the Haitian film director reveals in the thinking of the young Marx was not just a personal idiosyncrasy. It mirrored the politics of the working class he had discovered and exchanged with in the cafes, salons, and banquets of the *Ville Lumière* between 1843 and 1845.

Although not necessarily pro-slavery and to different degrees, all prominent French socialists, from Proudhon to Louis Blanc to Pierre Leroux, supported the colonial cause in the early 1840s as a way to solve the so-called "social question" at home and export socialism abroad. Calling and fighting for the liberation of the oppressed in Algeria or Guadeloupe was therefore not a pressing concern to their politics. And thus, it did not become a pressing concern to the "abstract" proletariat on whose shoulders Marx, in his *Paris Manuscripts* and later in the *Communist Manifesto*, had decided to devolve the task of overthrowing capitalism. [2]

Things began to change when Marx moved to London. His immersion in a different working-class culture, and in particular his close association with the Chartist radical and labor poet Ernest Jones, is key to the broadening of his outlook. [3]

## Radical London

The dust of revolutions had barely settled in continental Europe when Marx landed in London in late August 1849 after being expelled from France by the new conservative regime. A year earlier, the revolutionary wing of Chartism "England's first mass movement driven by the working class" had attempted to give the people north of the

Channel their own springtime. [4]

In early June 1848, Ernest Jones gave an inflammatory speech in East London, declaring to the crowd that the blow for liberty should be struck first in Ireland, calling for its liberation from the British yoke. He was immediately arrested and sentenced to two years of solitary confinement. Plans were soon made among Chartist radicals to foment an armed insurrection in the capital, break Jones out of police custody, overthrow the government, and establish a republic.

Among the conspirators were William Dowling and Thomas Fay, two Irish freedom fighters, and the black Chartist tailor and abolitionist William Cuffay, son of a West Indian slave. The conspiracy thus had a profound Atlantic dimension, and had it succeeded, they would have revived the long, urban insurrectionary tradition of the “motley proletariat” throughout the oceanic basin, as historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have tracked in *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

The plot had been discovered and preemptively thwarted when Marx stepped on the docks of the river Thames. Jones had been incarcerated for nearly a year, and Cuffay, Dowling, Fay, and three other conspirators were on their way to lifetime penal servitude in Australia. Chartism was seriously weakened, but its radical political tradition continued to live on.

Led by self-made newspaper editor, former sailor, and leader of the Fraternal Democrats George Julian Harney, the Chartist movement was on its way to revival through its left wing. Drawing lessons from the defeat of revolution in England, Harney was reorganizing Chartism as an independent working-class movement on a new, socialist basis — “the Charter and something more,” as the motto went.

Marx, who had broken off relations with the London-based Germans of the Communist League, was attracted by Harney’s red republicanism and joined his circle with enthusiasm in 1850. In November of that year, Harney’s newspaper, *The Red Republican*, published the first English translation of the *Communist Manifesto*. In the meantime, Jones had been released from prison and resumed his Chartist activism by joining Harney’s “reds,” where he befriended Marx.

## Marx and Jones

Jones and Marx were both thirty-two years old in 1850, and both were German by birth. Born in a British aristocratic family in Berlin and educated there until adulthood, Jones could not only communicate fluently in Marx’s mother tongue, but he could also share part of a common culture with him, which helped to consolidate their friendship. They soon connected over politics.

Marx became quickly impressed by Jones’s oratory prowess. He attended Jones’s lectures and speeches several times between 1850 and 1851, as the latter was touring England to remobilize the Chartist base. Jones, in Marx’s view, was then “the most talented, consistent and energetic representative of Chartism,” leading him to assume the role of effective leader within the Chartist body. When Jones decided to launch his own weekly newspaper, *Notes to the People*, in May 1851, Marx did not hesitate to offer himself as a contributor.

Marx was then earning his main income as the chief European correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, but contributing his journalism to a Chartist press organ was a way to reach out directly to the British labor movement. He signed two articles in the *Notes*, both on the 1848 revolutions in France, and co-wrote at least six others with Jones.

Additionally, as he admitted later to Engels, Marx was responsible for providing guidance and allegedly direct assistance in the writing of all the economic articles appearing in Jones's weekly between 1851 and 1852, which amounted for more than two-thirds of all pieces published in it.

Such involvement immersed Marx in a new intellectual environment, where he was exposed to, and therefore learning from, the ideas and political views of Chartism, including on anti-imperialism.

## Chartism Against Empire

Through his journalistic collaboration and political partnership with Jones, and unlike his Parisian years, Marx bound himself to a labor movement that had a long history of resistance to colonial conquests, stretching back to seventeenth-century Diggers and Levellers and onward to eighteenth-century Painite Jacobins. In the 1850s, Jones was without a doubt the most consistent and ardent advocate of that tradition within Chartism. His anti-colonialism had sent him to prison in 1848; it only deepened after he came out.

It was from his cell that Jones began to write verses of "The New World, A Democratic Poem." The epic opened the first issue of the *Notes to the People*, and became Jones's most famous piece. It envisions a world revolution breaking out in British-occupied India, where

Rolls the fierce torrent of a people's rights,

And Sepoy-soldiers, waking, band by band,

At last remember they've a fatherland!

The decolonial revolutionary storm spreads next to Africa and avenges the abuses of slavery in its wake, conjuring the spirits of Haitian revolutionaries. [\[5\]](#)

Deep in the burning south a cloud appears,

The smouldering wrath of full four thousand years,

Whatever name caprice of history gave,

Moor, Afrit, Ethiop, Negro, still meant slave!...

And, dire allies! to make their vengeance sure,

Behind them tower Ogé, and L'Ouverture.

Finally, revolution in Africa sweeps through Central and South America, where the insurgents overthrow centuries of Spanish imperial rule on behalf of conquered indigenous peoples.

Laugh Mexico! and clap thy hands Peru!

Old Montezuma! break thy charnel through.

Relight your lamps, poor Vestals of the Sun!

That you may see Pizarro's work outdone!

Militant experience in radical London had taught Jones that the battle for the Charter was interwoven with abolitionism and anti-colonialism, and that the working class was global and multiracial. [6] [7] But the crushing defeat in 1848–49 and the political apathy it caused in Britain and throughout Europe had rearranged the order of struggles, for he now believed that the global revolutionary offensive in the reactionary 1850s would not be initiated by the workers of Europe but by the oppressed masses of the colonies.

Never had Marx been collaborating so closely with someone holding such anti-colonialist views. As a contributor and reader of the *Notes*, he could neither have missed Jones's "New World" nor his column, "Our Colonies," which denounced British imperialism and tried to rally working-class readers to support resistance movements against British rule abroad. [8]

This editorial line carried over into the *People's Paper*, launched by Jones in May 1852, replacing the *Notes* and becoming Chartism's main press organ. Marx continued his editorial and journalistic collaboration for the new weekly, contributing a total of twenty-five articles, some of them reprinted from the *Tribune*. The first issue of the *People's Paper* declared its anti-colonialist outlook with this appeal to the workers: "We have looked, and very properly, at the interests of European democracy; be it ours, to look at our colonial struggles." Liberation from British rule in the colonies, in other words, was the lever for proletarian liberation in the capitalist core.

We can only wonder what Marx might have thought or said to Jones. Four years earlier in the *Manifesto*, he and Engels had considered Western imperialism as a progressive and beneficial force drawing underdeveloped societies into bourgeois civilization. He was now collaborating with someone who held the opposite opinion, a situation that pulled him toward what his Hegelian training would have recognized as a position of immanent criticism — that is, criticism that submits to and appropriates the very premises of a competing standpoint in order to transcend it dialectically.

A first sign of the dialectical effect of Jones's anti-colonialism on Marx's thinking is found in his 1852 *Tribune* article "The Chartists," in which he quotes one of Jones's speeches denouncing the abuses and coercion of British rule in Sri Lanka. A year after that pivotal text, India came onto their journalistic radar, and it became evident that Marx was becoming part of, and was absorbed by, the Chartist intellectual community into which he gravitated.

## The Anti-Colonial Initiative

The debates that took place in Parliament over the renewal of the East India Company's charter from 1852 through 1853, which disclosed details on how India was ruled and managed, prompted Jones and Marx to shift their focus to the distant eastern colony. And just like their politics up to that point, their journalism cannot be separated. [9]

Jones first wrote a series of articles in the *People's Paper* that denounced British rule in India as a legalized direct

plunder of the native population. In that series published in May 1853, Jones refers to India as the “Ireland of the East,” where decades of “British barbarism,” as he labels British rule, did not result in progress but dire misery. It was typical of the Chartist critique of empire to invert the prevailing Orientalist discourse of imperialism and cast not the colonized but British rulers in the role of barbarians.

But Jones, like no other Chartists and in tune with the perspective developed in “The New World,” went a step further and advocated for Indian independence, wishing that the army of native soldiers — known as *sepoys* — would turn against British rulers and launch a national liberation movement. In a subsequent article, Jones linked the exploitation of British workers to the colonial oppression of the Indian population, reiterating that an independent India was crucial to class struggle at home.

Marx was converging towards similar arguments. Shifting from the overall tone of the *Manifesto*, his *Tribune* articles acknowledge that British imperialism did not bring progress and civilization in India but death and destruction. He, too, employed the “Ireland of the East” analogy to depict India, an indication that Jones was connected to the multilinear evolution of his thinking.

In his famous August 8, 1853, article, “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” moreover, Marx condemned British rule in India as an example of “the inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization,” couching it in terms consistent with the Chartist trope of empire. In the same article, he conceded through a new anti-colonialist rhetoric that the liberation of India could happen either from a working-class uprising in Britain, or from a self-emancipatory movement led by the colonized masses themselves. This was a major shift in Marx’s thinking because, for the first time, he outlined a scenario that granted colonial peoples with the initiative of revolutionary social change, a position that concurred precisely with that of Jones.

In 1854, Marx supported Jones’s grassroots organizing that led to the creation of a national workers’ assembly — the so-called Labour Parliament — in Manchester. In April 1856, he attended a banquet held to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the *People’s Paper*, at which he gave the opening speech. As he told Engels, his speech aimed to consolidate his position as a member and contributor to the Chartist movement. In the same militant spirit, Marx took the street later that year and participated in a demonstration of support for the Chartist John Frost, who had returned from penal servitude.

Thus, as an anti-colonial revolt was about to break out in India, Chartist activism continued to occupy a significant place in Marx’s life.

## The Indian Specter

In the spring of 1857, dispatches of a mutiny in India’s colonial army led by rebellious sepoy soldiers began to filter back through Britain. Immediately, Marx and Jones took interest in the event. What they had conjectured in theory four years earlier was now presenting itself as a flesh-and-blood possibility, which they did not hesitate to embrace.

While the British press produced accounts that denigrated and ridiculed the insurgents, Marx and Jones followed a deviating but converging course of reportage. From the outset, they sympathized with the suffering of the Indian population and denounced British rule in the colony, both pointing to the inevitability of the mutiny morphing into a broader, national liberation movement. They also insisted on the self-activity and political rationality of the colonized Indians as the decisive factor in shaping the course of events. And Marx, like Jones, viewed the insurrection as a new specter that haunted Europe, where it could cause a crisis opening up an opportunity for a new workers’ offensive. “India is now our best ally,” Marx wrote enthusiastically to Engels.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1857, Jones approached and wrote about the insurrection through the Chartist trope of retributivism – that is, the idea imported from religious messianism that history is driven by an immanent justice process whereby historical wrongs are rectified through retribution. He thus maintained on August 4, 1857, that “the iniquities of nations are ever visited by retribution,” and that the Indian insurrection was a “striking instance of this compensating balance in History – this retributive agency,” which he placed alongside liberation movements in Poland, Hungary, and Italy.

A week later, Marx wrote “The Indian Revolt” for the *Tribune*, in which he recognized that the Indian insurrection embodied a dialectical, transformative social dynamic comparable to what Western Europe had gone through – a complete reversal of his initial position regarding the East. He remarked:

There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself. The first blow dealt the French monarch proceeded from the nobility, not from the peasants. The Indian revolt does not commence with the Ryots, tortured, dishonored and stripped naked by the British, but with the Sepoys, clad, fed, petted, fatted and pampered by them.

It is stunning how Jones’s phraseology creeps into Marx’s prose here, suggesting an enduring imprint of Chartism on his thinking as the Indian insurrection unfolded. The anti-colonial uprising at the other end of the British empire certainly impelled Marx to revise his position and integrate colonialism into his materialist conception of history.

But it appears that Marx very likely took his cue from Jones in order to take this step forward, finding in the writing of his long-time comrade arguments that went beyond the standard binary antagonism in core capitalist countries of bourgeoisie versus proletariat to include an ongoing anti-colonial movement turning imperial rule upside down.

Jones, by then, had begun to contemplate the possibility of forming an electoral coalition with the bourgeois-radical camp in order to win the franchise for the workers. Marx was certainly disappointed with the move, leading him to split, although only temporarily, with Jones in 1858. This disillusionment, however, was political, and in no way did it impair Marx’s esteem for Jones the writer and social critic, as the homology of their journalism on the Indian insurrection indicates.

To a great degree, the 1850s constituted a Chartist decade for the Londoner Marx. It was a decade in which he learned from his partnership with Jones and, more generally, from his experience within the Chartist movement. When he came out of that decade, Marx may have been disenchanted with Jones’s politics, but he was transformed intellectually. Most importantly, thanks to Jones, he was firmly set on an anti-colonial path that would continue to shape his core political project for the years to come.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/young-karl-marx-review-raoul-peck/>.

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/working-class-capitalism-socialists-strike-power/>.

[3] <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/0a953782-01d3-3155-9f0d-5c782ec2ca0f>.

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/chartism-feargus-oconnor-democracy-suffrage-thomas-paine/>.

[5] <https://jacobinmag.com/2012/03/the-black-jacobin-2>.

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/british-empire-kenya-oman-ireland-state-secrecy>

[7] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/native-americans-marxism-colonialism-nodapl-archie-phinney-means-nez-perce>

[8] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/winston-churchill-british-empire-colonialism>

[9] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/karl-marx-journalism-writings-newspaper>