

Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue

John David Smith

The University of North Carolina, Charlotte, jdsmith4@uncc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Smith, John David (2018) "Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss2/11>

Review

Smith, John David

Spring 2018

Kulikoff, Allan. *Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue*. Oxford University Press, \$18.95 ISBN 9780190210809

Allan Kulikoff's slender book designed for undergraduate college courses draws on selected writings of Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx to construct a trans-Atlantic dialogue on various aspects of mid-nineteenth-century labor, class, and politics. Kulikoff's concise introduction, "The Corporate Lawyer and the Revolutionary," plus head notes to the documents, suggest how the great republican and the great communist agreed and differed on subjects central to the Civil War's bigger meaning. Although Lincoln and Marx never met, the tumult of their times necessarily brought them together intellectually.

Students will welcome the comparative lens that Kulikoff, a distinguished historian of early American history and the South, provides readers, positioning his protagonists' words not only in dialogue but also in context. Whereas Lincoln's texts such as his 1854 Peoria speech, his 1858 "House Divided" speech, his First Inaugural Address, his August 22, 1862, letter to Horace Greeley, and his preliminary and final versions of the Emancipation Proclamation are generally familiar and widely available to undergraduates, few know and have access to Marx's writings. They constitute the most valuable and successful part of Kulikoff's documentary edition.

Both Lincoln and Marx were Enlightenment thinkers—deeply influenced by the democratic revolutions their forebears had experienced. They shared a belief that the rights of labor held the key to societal progress. Strongly committed to free labor ideology and to the Union cause, they grasped that the Civil War resulted from slavery broadly interpreted, and that the internecine war ultimately would lead to slavery's demise.

But Lincoln and Marx disagreed on major questions.

Lincoln married into a slaveholding family, practiced corporate and patent law, and defended all manner of capitalists, including railroad operators and slave owners. He perceived a unity of interest between capital and labor. Constrained by politics and the vicissitudes of war, Lincoln moved slowly but steadily toward emancipation. As Marx quipped in March 1862, "President Lincoln never ventures a step forward before the tide of circumstances and the general call of public opinion forbid further delay. But once 'Old Abe' realises [*sic*] that such a turning point has been reached, he surprises friend and foe alike by a sudden operation executed as noiselessly as possible" (64). Kulikoff correctly observes that Marx purposely mischaracterized Lincoln as a common man in order to "turn him into a proletarian" (85).

Marx believed that capital and labor were engaged in unrelenting conflict. He emphasized class conflict between workers and those whom he considered their capitalist masters. A proletarian revolution would triumph in America only after workers overthrew the commodification of people generally and, in the South, following emancipation.

Marx considered the Civil War a central event in the proletarian revolution. He had read extensively about the United States and followed the details of the Civil War closely. As Marx remarked in Vienna's *Die Presse* in December 1861, "the slavery question" constituted "the question underlying the whole Civil War" (66).

He paid especially close attention to the war's radical dimensions, including the flood of runaway slaves to federal contraband camps and the militarization of African Americans. In August 1862 Marx explained to his collaborator and friend Friedrich Engels that Lincoln's government should adopt "revolutionary methods" to "overthrow the supremacy of the border state statesmen." He added, "One single N[EGRO] REGIMENT would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves" (73). Two months later Marx described Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation as "the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union, tantamount to tearing up the old American Constitution" (86).

Upon Lincoln's reelection in November 1864, Marx explained that "the victorious termination of the antislavery war has opened a new epoch in the annals of the working class" (114). In his opinion the prospective northern victory and its concomitant abolition of slavery signified a precursor of the elevation of the proletariat worldwide. According to Marx, "the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic" (105).

Three years later, in his chapter on the eight-hour-day movement in the first volume of *Das Capital* (1867), Marx broadened his critique of capitalism in Lincoln's America. He noted how the corruption by capitalists circumscribed opportunities for immigrants and exacerbated the economic impoverishment of workers across the board. That said, Marx acknowledged that for all of slavery's horrors, its abolition and emancipation nonetheless contributed to the invigoration of the workers' movement that had hitherto been impossible under the "peculiar institution." As he explained, "out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose" (113). In 1871 Marx explained in the *New York Herald* that capital itself was "only another form of slavery and the condition of the laborer is the same in either case." He maintained that the arguments employed by slavery's old defenders in the antebellum South were "identical with those used by capitalists and monopolists today" (115).

While *Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue* will prove useful in various undergraduate courses, students would have been better served had the author provided more context and detail in his document headnotes. A chronology for both Lincoln and Marx also would have proven helpful for those unfamiliar with their biographies. Additionally, student readers especially will be poorly served by a number of minor flaws in this book, including the author's repeated misuse of *succession* (for secession) and the misspellings of George B. *McClelland* (for McClellan), John A. *McClelland* (for McClelland), and Charles *Ramsdel* (for

Ramsdell). In another slip of the keyboard, Kulikoff dates a letter from Marx to Engels regarding President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies as appearing in June 1765 when, of course, the letter must have appeared in June 1865.

On a happier note, in his headnotes Kulikoff provides students with welcome degrees of textual analysis. Lincoln, he explains, often was disingenuous in his speeches and public letters, careful not to reveal policies to which he was already committed. For his part Marx, no matter how carefully he read Union and Confederate newspapers to survey the American scene, often exaggerated his arguments, his data, and his language, drawing too heavily and uncritically upon the one-dimensional northern antislavery press.

Writing to Lincoln upon his reelection in 1864, Marx underscored their joint commitment to overturning slavery which he interpreted as assuring Union victory and eventually to uplifting the proletariat worldwide. Obtaining "the true freedom of labor" was a long struggle, Marx reminded Lincoln, but at last, in the American case, it soon would be attained "by the red sea of civil war" (105).

John David Smith is the Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is the author or editor of twenty-nine books, including Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming 2019) (with Micheal J. Larson).