MARX AND ENGELS
AND RACIALISM

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 the Jews, although not persecuted, were treated as second-class citizens and excluded from certain professions. No Jew could hold a commission in the Prussian army or practise 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 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 race in a most violent fashion.  

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. 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 necessary of Jewry is self-interest. What is the worldly religion of the Jews? It is the petty haggling of the hawker. What is his worldly God? It is money.

So in Jewry we recognise a contemporary universal anti-social phenomenon, which has reached its present pitch through a process of historical development in which the Jews have zealously co-operated. And this evil anti-social aspect of Jewry has grown to a stage at which it must necessarily collapse.

The Jews have emancipated themselves in a Jewish fashion. Not only have they mastered the power of money but — with or without the Jews — money has become a world power. The Jews have emancipated themselves by turning Christians into Jews.

Money is the most zealous God of Israel and no other God can compete with him. Money debases all human Gods and turns them into goods. Money is the universal value of everything.

The God of the Jews has become secularised and has become a World God. The bill of exchange is the real God of the Jews.

Jewry reaches its climax in the consummation of bourgeois society — and bourgeois society has reached its highest point in the Christian world.

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." Robert Payne has remarked that "this solution of the Jewish question was not very different from Adolf Hitler’s, for it involved the liquidation of Judaism".

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 — a regular contributor to the New York Daily Tribune — were quite insufficent for his needs. Engels, then employed as a clerk by the firm of Ermen and 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), Stiefel and
SpieImann 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
Dana (editor of the New York Daily Tribune) in advance payment for
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 1839 he wrote to Engels: "It is the
devil of a nuisance that I have no Bamberger in London any more."9

Marx's anti-Semitism may be illustrated by examining his attitude
towards Lassalle, who was a Jew from Breslau in Silesia. As a young
man Lassalle had led the workers of Düsseldorf during the revo-
cution 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
gaol 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
Daily 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 deter-
mined 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 Germanness on
a negro basis was bound to produce an extraordinary hybrid.
The importance of the fellow is also niggerlike.11

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" (key), "Ephraim Gesheil" and
"Judel Braun." And Marx's wife, in a letter to Engels, called
Lassalle "the little Berlin Jew."12

After Lassalle's death in 1864 there are fewer uncomplimentary
remarks about Jews in the Marx-Engels correspondence than
before. In that year Engels became a partner in the firm of
Ermen and Engels and from 1867 onwards he paid Marx an annual
allowance of £350. So, although Marx's financial problems were by
no means solved, he had less need than formerly to try to borrow
money from Jews - such as Ignaz Horn and Leo Frankel. He
wrote to Engels in 1875 that while travelling to Karlsbad, "a sly-
looking Yid" had been his travelling companion from London to
Rotterdam. The Jewish businessman was foolish enough to confide
in Marx, who reported details of his rather odd business deals in
textiles to Engels. In his old age, when on holiday in Ramsgate, he
declared that there were "many Jews and fleas" at the resort.16

It was not only in private letters to his closest friend that Marx
indulged in anti-Semitic outbursts. In an article in the New York
Daily Tribune (January 4, 1856), in which he discussed an inter-
national loan to be raised by the Russian government to finance the
war in the Crimea, Marx savagely attacked the Jewish financiers
who co-operated to place the loan. Marx wrote:

This loan is brought out under the auspices of the house of
Stieglitz at St. Petersburg. Stieglitz is to Alexander what
Rothschild is to Francis Joseph, what Fould is to Louis
Napoleon. The late Czar Nicholas made Stieglitz a Russian
baron, as the late Kaiser Franz made old Rothschild an
Austrian baron, while Louis Napoleon has made a cabinet
minister of Fould, with a free ticket to the Tuileries for the
females of his family. Thus we find every tyrant backed by a Jew, as is every Pope by a Jesuit. In truth, the cravings of oppressors would be hopeless, and the practicability of war out of the question, if there were not an army of Jesuits to smother thought and a handful of Jews to ransack pockets.

Hope and 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 monopolize 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 a 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 and jobbing of securities ... Their business is to watch the moneys available for investment and keenly observe where they lie. Here and there and everywhere 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 those Jews about any loose capital in the hands of a trader.

Marx went on to attack the Jewish finance houses of Königs- warter, Raphael, Stern, Bischofshheim, 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 insure 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 fifties more, the Jews will dig them up. Let us not be thought too severe upon these loan-mongering gentry. The fact that 1855 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 poetic 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.

Engels’ attitude towards the Jews was different from that of Marx. He had never denounced the Jews as a race of petty traders and moneylenders as Marx had done in his youthful article in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher. Indeed he later declared that anti-semitism was the mark of a backward culture and was confined to Russia, Austria and Prussia.

In 1881 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-Semitic 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.” “Whilst 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 Bebel that he was glad to learn that new Jewish recruits were joining the German Social Democrat
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.23

Although Engels disapproved of anti-semitism and welcomed Jews like Kautsky and 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".24 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 greedy Jew disguised under brilliantine and flashy jewels".25 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.

What has happened is what always happens when Jews are about. At first they thanked God that they had a Schiller Anstalt, but hardly had they got inside than they declared that it was not good enough for them and that they wanted to build a bigger club house—a true temple of Moses—to which the Schiller Anstalt could be moved. This would indeed be the quickest road to bankruptcy... I look out! In a year or two you will get a circular reading like this: "In view of the bankruptcy of the late Schiller Anstalt ..."26

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 and Engels because of "Jewish chicaneries".27 In October 1867, and again in May 1868, Engels complained that his time was being wasted by visits from "that damned old Jew" Leibel Choras, who was a refugee from Moldavia where the Jews were being persecuted.28 Engels obviously had little sympathy for Leibel Choras. And in 1870 Engels dismissed Leo Frankel as "a real little Yid".29

In 1892 in a letter to the French socialist leader Paul Lafargue—Marx's son-in-law—Engels 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 lumière, of which the Parisian philistine is so proud and which he believes to be the supreme power in the universe.30

Engels also expressed his contempt for the Polish Jews who were, in his view, "caricatures of Jews".31 He wrote to Laura Lafargue:

Business principle of the Polish Jew to ask much so as to be able to rebate, as 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.32

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 Lewis Henry Morgan—Engels gave a lyrical account of the "wonderful childlike simplicity" of the way of life in the Iroquois Indian tribes. He wrote:

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 communistically 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...33

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 Daily Tribune they analysed the causes and events of the Mutiny, which they regarded as an illustration of the “general disaffection expressed against English supremacy on the part of the great Asiatic nations …”.

In view of Engels’ 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 were either already under foreign rule when they entered into the first primitive phase of civilisation or who were actually forced into the earliest phase of civilisation by their foreign master.”

NOTES


6. A small colony of Bambergers can be traced in the City of London during the mid-

1850s, based on King Street, Snowhill. Zacharias Bamberger, for example, of 19 King Street, ship and commission agent, was a partner in the firm of Prager & Bamberger, 84 Lower Thomas Street, while Louis Bamberger & Co., merchants, and Abraham Bamberger & Co., wholesale boot manufacturers, both operated from 20 King Street, Snowhill (Kelly & Co., Post Office London Directory, 1855, p.813). Of these Zacharias Bamberger seems most likely to have been Marx’s moneylender.

7. See Karl Marx to F. Engels, July 31, 1851 in Gesamtausgabe, Part III, Vol. 1, p.224 and Jan. 21, 1852, ibid., p.444.

8. For example “Spielmeier always sends one away with the nasal Jewish remark ‘Kaine Nootiz da’” (i.e. “Keine Notiz da!”): Karl Marx to F. Engels, Aug. 18, 1853 in Gesamtausgabe, Part III, Vol. 1, p.492. 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).


22. E. Bernstein to F. Engels, Sept. 9, 1881: ibid., p.37.


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28. F. Engels to Karl Marx, Oct. 11, 1867 and May 6, 1868 in Gesamtausgabe, Part III, Vol. 3, p.432 and Vol. 4, p.52. It has not proved possible to identify Choras further.
29. F. Engels to Karl Marx, April 15, 1870 in Gesamtausgabe, Part III, Vol. 4, p.305.
31. F. Engels to Paul Ernst, April 15, 1870 in Gesamtausgabe, Part III, Vol. 4, p.305.
34. For selections of articles and letters written by Marx and Engels on colonisation see Karl Marx and F. Engels, On Colonisation (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow) and The First Indian War of Independence, 1857–1859 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow) (London, 1960).
35. F. Engels, “Der magyarische Kampf” and “Der demokratische Panславismus” in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, Jan. 13 and Feb. 15, 1849: reprinted in Karl Marx and F. Engels, Werke, Vol. 6, p.165 et seq. P.W. Blackstock and B.F. Hoselitz have translated and edited a useful anthology of these articles in K. Marx and F. Engels, The Russian Menace to Europe (Glencoe, Ill., 1952). Pages 56–90 and 247 are important for “peoples without a history”; in the true spirit of Pan-Germanism Marx and Engels considered the Czechs, Slovaks and Ruthenians, together with the South Slavs, to be “ethnic trash".