

On Marx and Lassalle, Engels and Carlyle: an exchange of letters

29 May 2002

Dear WSWS,

I am writing in regard to the posting “An exchange of letters on Marx and anti-Semitism” and a related matter concerning Friedrich Engels and Thomas Carlyle.

While David North debunks the notion that Karl Marx was a Jew-hater, Mr. North does not seem to address the point that the founder of Scientific Socialism slandered Ferdinand Lassalle as a “Jew-nigger” (Juden Itzig) and an “extraordinary hybrid.” Indeed, both men had professionally strained relations, and Lassalle’s proclivity for bombast, extravagance, and romantic elitism never helped the situation. Yet, even if Marx was offhandedly prejudiced, this is not an adequate enough excuse for careless, brutish statements that have overwhelmingly nasty implications.

Concerning Engels, in an 1843 review, he is known to have colorfully extolled Thomas Carlyle’s “Past and Present,” saying, “[It] is the only [book] worth reading [;] the only one which strikes a human chord, presents human relations and shows traces of a human point of view.” Yet, six years thereafter, Carlyle published a terribly racist polemic entitled “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” which the utilitarian-abolitionist, John Stuart Mill, sought to refute in “On the Negro Question”. Was Engels not aware of this debate?

As ours is a diversely populated world, socioeconomic discourses should never completely override ethno-social concerns and issues. Therefore, please better serve your readership by clearly outlining those factors which induced Marx’s insensitive appellations towards Lassalle, and why Engels never rebutted Carlyle’s bigotry, or his offensive paternalism, compulsive feudalistic ideals, and ghastly proto-fascism. Otherwise, those who are uninformed may ultimately content themselves with revisionism, or form their assessments of Marx and Engels on such Rightist

literatures as Paul Johnson’s “Intellectuals.”

Yours sincerely,

ADW

Dear ADW:

As far as Marx’s references to Ferdinand Lassalle are concerned, I do not know what there is to “address.” In the thousands of pages of Marx’s correspondence with Engels, of which there are dozens that refer to Lassalle, there are to be found a few epithets that would not pass muster today. But Marx lived in the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. You state that my earlier letter “debunks the notion that Karl Marx was a Jew-hater.” So, then, why do you raise to the level of a special issue Marx’s use of the epithet “Juden Itzig” (which, by the way, translates as “Jew Isaac”)? These epithets, however offensive they appear in a modern context, were employed in a different historical era—prior to the rise of political anti-Semitism. We should add that Marx employed these epithets in his private correspondence with Engels. Marx never sought to rally public opinion against Lassalle on the basis of his Jewish origins. Indeed, Marx’s criticism of Lassalle was rooted in political differences of the most profound and far-reaching significance for the German (and international) workers movement. Marx’s letters to Engels on the subject of Lassalle, and, for that matter, his direct correspondence with Lassalle, retain immense political and theoretical value.

As for your concern that Engels failed to distance himself from Thomas Carlyle, you happen to be wrong. It is true that Carlyle evolved in the course of the 1840s into an out-and-out political reactionary. This evolution reflected the peculiar social and historical character of Carlyle’s critique of emerging capitalist society. His early work expressed the “anti-capitalism” of a man who evoked nostalgically the values of a feudal and aristocratic society. However, the essentially

reactionary character of this critique became all too apparent in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolutions throughout Europe and the Chartist movement in Britain. It should also be pointed out that the views of Engels also developed considerably between 1843 and 1850. When he wrote his first assessment of Carlyle's work in 1843, Engels was not yet a Marxist. Nor, we should point out, was Marx. But by the time Marx and Engels wrote again on the subject of Carlyle, in April 1850, they had worked out the essential foundations of the materialist conception of history. This entailed an extensive critique of various forms of petty-bourgeois and pre-Marxian socialism, including that of Carlyle.

In a review of Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, Marx and Engels examine critically the intellectual evolution of Carlyle. Rather than offering a moralistic critique of Carlyle, Marx and Engels explain the theoretical basis of the author's reactionary political views and intellectual degeneration. Rather than cite extensive passages from this valuable essay, I suggest that you consult Volume 10 of International Publishers' edition of the *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels (pp. 301-10) and read it for yourself.

Permit me to take issue with your claim that "socioeconomic discourses should never completely override ethno-social concerns and issues." What you call "ethno-social concerns and issues" become all too easily a justification for various forms of retrograde identity politics. What our "diversely populated world" desperately needs is an international political party whose program is based on scientific socioeconomic analysis.

Finally, in the vain hope that I might lay to rest the bogus issue of the "anti-Jewishness" of the founders of modern socialism, I will cite a passage from a letter written by Engels in April 1890. It was published a month later in a workers newspaper. It was written in response to a new and highly dangerous phenomenon: the rise of political anti-Semitism. Engels explains that anti-Semitism in this modern form "is merely a reaction of declining medieval social strata and wage-laborers, so that all it serves are reactionary ends under a purportedly socialist cloak; it is a degenerate form of feudal socialism and we can have nothing to do with that."

Noting that the modern socialist movement is "deeply indebted to the Jews," Engels concludes his letter as

follows:

"Leaving aside Heine and Borne, Marx was a full-blooded Jew; Lassalle was a Jew. Many of our best people are Jews. My friend Victor Adler, who is now atoning in a Viennese prison for his devotion to the cause of the proletariat, Eduard Bernstein, editor of the London *Sozialdemokrat*, Paul Singer, one of our best men in the Reichstag—people whom I am proud to call my friends, and all of them Jewish! After all, I myself was dubbed a Jew by the *Gartenlaube* [a right-wing magazine] and, indeed, if given the choice, I'd as lief be a Jew as a 'Herr von'." [*Collected Works*, vol. 27, pp. 50-51]

Yours sincerely,

David North,

WSWS Editorial Board



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