

Lincoln and the enduring legacy of America's second revolution: A reply to a critic of the "Letter from Afar"

David North
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To the dissatisfied WSWS reader, Gavan2020,

Since the posting of "A Letter from Afar by A. Lincoln," the WSWS has received many responses. Most have been favorable, and some enthusiastic. Several readers have urged me to explain where the letter came from. One asked whether I could put her in touch with Mr. Lincoln.

Your response, posted in the comment section, belongs to a smaller subset of replies that read the letter as a betrayal of Marxism and a slide down the slope of capitulation to bourgeois democracy. These letters, and yours among them, express concerns that are poorly and mistakenly conceived.

Why did I write this letter? A personal element may as well be acknowledged at the outset. I have admired Lincoln for almost as long as I can remember. I have watched the screen recreations of him by Henry Fonda, Raymond Massey, Hal Holbrook, Sam Waterston, and Daniel Day-Lewis many times over. Holbrook's portrayal remains, in my opinion, the most penetrating. I follow, as best I can, the extensive and ever-increasing biographical literature. This is not entirely exceptional among members of the Socialist Equality Party.

I have read all of Lincoln's great speeches and letters and committed several to memory, and in composing "the letter from afar" I attempted to imitate something of the cadence of his nineteenth-century poetic prose. The result is, as one might expect, only a pale imitation. Had I been 21 years old in 1860, I would have joined the Wide Awakes who cheered Lincoln on during the presidential campaign. Make of that imagined inclination what you will. It did not prevent me from joining the Trotskyist Workers League (predecessor of the SEP) in 1971, and the half century that has followed has given me no reason to regard these two attachments of my youth, one historical and the other contemporary, as standing in contradiction to one another. On the contrary.

There is, however, a more important reason for writing and posting this letter on the *World Socialist Web Site*. As we approach the 250th anniversary of the public proclamation of the Declaration of Independence—which proclaimed the equality of all people and the inherent right to overthrow oppressive governments—the working class confronts an unprecedented attack on its democratic rights. The United States is being transformed by a reactionary capitalist oligarchy into a dictatorship with overtly fascistic characteristics. Moreover, this is not only an American phenomenon; it is the spearhead of a global process. Under these conditions, it is "fitting and proper," to use Lincoln's words, to invoke the historical experience of America's past revolutions to bring to the surface and activate the deep-rooted democratic convictions of the working class.

You object to my letter on the grounds that Lincoln was a bourgeois politician, that "slavery was not wage-slavery," and that the invocation of his memory by a socialist publication constitutes a concession to a

"nationalism that was progressive at the time of Lincoln, yet is regressively reactionary today." You counterpose, with a certain rhetorical flourish, that "Lincoln died that the slaves might be free—in and with capitalism," while "Trotsky died that workers might be free—with socialism."

Thank you for reminding me.

The formulation dissolves the actual historical relationship between the bourgeois-democratic revolutions and the socialist movement that emerged in their aftermath and now stands as their only legitimate heir. One does not arrive at a Marxist position on these questions by stringing together historically abstract trivialities and pronouncing the result a theory.

The Civil War was the second American Revolution. Its outcome—the violent destruction of the slave power and the abolition of chattel slavery—was a world-historical event that transformed the conditions under which the working class in the United States and internationally could develop and fight. Marx followed the war with the closest attention, organized solidarity with the Union among British workers, and understood, as did Lincoln himself in the final period of his life, that the logic of the conflict drove beyond the original aims of the bourgeoisie that had launched it.

After Lincoln's assassination, Marx composed in May 1865 for the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association an address to President Andrew Johnson that contained an appraisal of Lincoln worth recalling, since you appear unfamiliar with it. Lincoln, Marx wrote, was "one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good." Marx described him as "a man neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his great goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them," a man who "did his titanic work as humbly as Heaven-born rulers do little things with the agility of a giant." That is the judgment of the author of *Capital* on the bourgeois politician whom you find it embarrassing for a socialist publication to invoke. You may wish to take the matter up with him. I'd be glad to help arrange a discussion, but I can't find Marx's current email address.

Lenin, in his "Letter to American Workers" of 1918, invoked the example of America's revolutions. He wrote:

The American people have a revolutionary tradition which has been adopted by the best representatives of the American proletariat, who have repeatedly expressed their complete solidarity with us Bolsheviks. That tradition is the war of liberation against the British in the eighteenth century and the Civil War in the nineteenth century. In some respects, if we only take into

consideration the “destruction” of some branches of industry and of the national economy, America in 1870 was behind 1860. But what a pedant, what an idiot would anyone be to deny on these grounds the immense, world-historic, progressive and revolutionary significance of the American Civil War of 1863-65!

Trotsky studied the American Civil War during the Russian Civil War and had intended to write a history of it. The conjunction is itself instructive. The commander of the Red Army, in the midst of a struggle for the survival of the first workers’ state, turned to the campaigns of Grant and Sherman not as an antiquarian diversion but because he understood, as Marx and Lenin had before him, that the great revolutionary upheavals of the bourgeois epoch were not external to the formation of the modern working class but constitutive of it, and that the socialist movement could not develop in the United States on the basis of an indifference, still less a hostility, to the democratic and revolutionary traditions out of which the American working class was historically formed.

To treat Lincoln as a figure alien to the democratic ideals of the socialist movement is to repudiate the method of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky in favor of a sectarian schema in which the working class is sealed off from the entire prior history of revolutionary struggle against feudalism, slavery and absolutism. That schema is a caricature of Marxism. It has appeared on the political stage many times before, always to the detriment of the movement that adopted it.

The WSWS waged a sustained campaign against the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project—a campaign conducted in defense of the revolutionary heritage of the United States against an effort to falsify the American Revolution and the Civil War as expressions of an immutable racial pathology, to expel Lincoln from the pantheon of progressive historical figures, and to substitute racial mythology for the class analysis of American history. The interventions of the WSWS, supported by the work of leading historians of the period, including James McPherson, Gordon Wood, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum and others, were directed precisely at defending the democratic and revolutionary content of these events against an academic and journalistic offensive that sought to liquidate them. The letter from Lincoln’s grave belongs not only to that political and historiographical fight, but the present struggle against Trump and the fascistic conspiracy of the oligarchy.

It is ironic that your criticism of the Lincoln letter dissolves into political confusion and opportunism. You write that “the Constitution that Lincoln had fought for cannot be revived today until the oligarchy be gone.”

First of all, the socialist revolution and the establishment of workers power will not “revive the Constitution,” which establishes the foundation of the bourgeois state. The socialist revolution will defend, revive and raise to a higher level the genuine democratic achievements of the revolutions of 1776-83 and 1861-65. The socialist revolution will not preserve the US Constitution’s executive, the bicameral legislature, unelected Supreme Court and the Electoral College. It will, however, “preserve, protect and defend” the genuine democratic content of the Bill of Rights and the additional critical rights enumerated in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution. These rights include that of birthright citizenship, a central conquest of the Civil War that is presently under attack by the fascistic Trump administration; and even that principle will be superseded by the replacement of national citizenship with a supra-national identity of a globally unified humanity as foreseen in the *Internationale*.

I must add, in this regard, that the creation of a socialist constitution will draw heavily on the experience of the Paris Commune, which erupted six years after the conclusion of the American Civil War. Our aim is not a better national state, but its “withering away.”

The letter from Lincoln’s grave is an attempt to mobilize what is best in the United States’ democratic heritage against what is worst in its contemporary capitalist-imperialist reality. It is an appeal to the American working class to reassert the traditions of the struggle for democratic rights, and to understand that the defense of these rights is now possible only through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program against the capitalist oligarchy.

You go on to write that I invoked Lincoln rather than Trotsky because the author “fears what is coming, from the soviet, by the soviet for the soviet, and the insurgent slate in the UAW is far more than what Lincoln could give the young American working-class then.”

I have been accused by anti-Marxists of many political errors in the course of fifty-five years in the Trotskyist movement, but never, until now, of fearing the formation of soviets. Indeed, the principal “sectarian” heresy for which I am most frequently denounced—by trade union officials, by the assorted pseudo-left tendencies that orbit the Democratic Party and by a fair number of academic critics who otherwise have little in common—is the SEP’s fight for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File committees independent of and opposed to the trade union bureaucracy.

The invocation of Lincoln and the war against the slavocracy, far from being a retreat from the perspective of workers’ power, is part of the political preparation for it. The American working class will not arrive at the construction of independent organs of struggle and rule without studying the history of the country in which it lives, and the revolutionary struggles from which its democratic traditions emerged.

There remains one further matter. You write that the WSWS “is not a website for literature, novels, literary experiments and turns of phrases, styles, poetry, etc.,” and add that “as Marxism is scientific, one can’t often use metaphors when writing on the class struggle.”

This is a wildly false statement to make about a publication you claim to read. The arts pages of the *World Socialist Web Site* have, for more than a quarter century, published extensive critical writing on film, theater, literature, music, painting and dance. The site has carried serious essays on Shakespeare, Pushkin, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Whitman, Twain, Dreiser, Wright, Trumbo and many others; on the great composers and the cinema of the twentieth century; on the cultural catastrophes inflicted by the political reaction of recent decades. David Walsh’s writings on film alone constitute the most sustained body of Marxist cultural criticism produced anywhere in the world during this period. Are these efforts, in your view, a distraction from the real business of the publication, or have you simply not bothered to look at them before pronouncing on what the publication is and is not?

The conception you advance—that scientific socialism is incompatible with metaphor, with literary form, with the imaginative resources of language—is a misunderstanding so profound that it is difficult to know where to begin in correcting it. Marx’s prose is among the great literary achievements of the nineteenth century. The opening of the *Manifesto*, the figure of the “old mole” [*alte Maulwurf*] in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the passages on commodity fetishism in *Capital*, the polemical fire of the writings against Proudhon and Bauer—none of this is decoration laid over an underlying scientific content. The literary power is inseparable from the analytical power, because the dialectical method requires forms of expression adequate to the contradictory, developing, living character of its object.

Trotsky was one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century in any language, and his political writing—the *History of the Russian Revolution*, *My Life*, *Literature and Revolution*, the polemics against the bureaucracy—is unimaginable apart from its literary qualities. Lenin, often supposed to be the dry technician of the movement, wrote with savage wit and a constant resort to figurative language. The notion that the working class is to be addressed in the flattened idiom of a bureaucratic

memorandum, with metaphor expunged and imagination held under suspicion, has nothing to do with Marxism. It has everything to do with the cultural impoverishment that Stalinism inflicted on the workers' movement in the twentieth century and from which it is still recovering.

We welcome, on the WSWS, poetry, literary experiment and sustained engagement with the resources of artistic form, directed toward the building of the international socialist movement of the working class and the Fourth International. This is an essential element of the political tasks of the movement. The October Revolution unleashed a flowering of artistic experiment, which the Stalinist reaction strangled. The recovery of that tradition, and its further development, is among the responsibilities the movement must shoulder.

In this connection, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will be marking the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution with an online webinar to which we have invited leading scholars of the Revolution. Among the issues to be taken up will be Lincoln's place in American and world history—the place, that is, of the man who carried through the unfinished business of 1776, and whose work it now falls to the working class to complete on an international socialist foundation.

Fraternally,
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Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)