

An exchange of letters on Marx and anti-Semitism

13 May 2002

Dear WSWWS,

I have been one of your young readers for almost a year now. I would like you to know that I will probably always consider your web site a good source of information; that much is relatively certain. However, in that year's time I have undertaken to read as much Marxist literature as I can, especially by Trotsky. But I recently got around to looking at Karl Marx's "On the Jewish Question" and I was quite disturbed by what I saw.

"What is the object of the Jew's worship in this world?" Marx asks. "Usury. What is his worldly god? Money.... What is the foundation of the Jew in this world? Practical necessity, private advantage.... The bill of exchange is the Jew's real God. His God is the illusory bill of exchange."

[
<http://www.vho.org/GB/Journals/JHR/5/1/Whisker69-76.html>]

This source may well be reactionary in nature, of that I am not sure. However, does this not present an immense problem for progressive people? In my opinion, the fact that Marx came from a rabbinical family does not in any way excuse these opinions. And in case one might think that, at least, he were only directing himself against the Jewish religion (and not the people in general), this is later found not to be the case. Also, it is my understanding that he referred to his rival Lassalle as "Jew-nigger."

I am well aware that, objectively speaking, these things have no bearing on Marx's economic theories, etc. For Hitler to say the sky is blue does not make the statement incorrect. However, it certainly casts a dark cloud over the entire Marxist movement that their "Grand Old Man" should hold such deeply reactionary convictions.

Furthermore, you use the argument of the

"dependence" of theory upon more abstract social opinions when you criticise Martin Heidegger's membership in the NSDAP [Nazi Party]. I do not claim to be an expert on German philosophy, but how do you at the WSWWS address this, and Marx's aforementioned anti-Semitism?

Sincerely,

IP

Mr. P:

I will reply as concisely as possible to your letter. The attempt to blackguard Marx as an anti-Semite is hardly new; and usually such efforts cite his very important essay "On the Jewish Question" as prima facie evidence in support of this allegation. Inasmuch as few people actually bother to study the entire essay, let alone familiarize themselves with the historical and political context within which it was written, "On the Jewish Question" is easily misrepresented.

The most important point that must be made is that Marx's essay is, first and foremost, a call for the complete political emancipation of the Jews. It was written in 1843 as a polemic against Bruno Bauer, who argued against emancipation on two grounds: first, that Jewish emancipation was not possible until all Germans were emancipated from religion entirely; second, that Jews neither can be free nor deserve to be free on account of the dastardly character of their religion.

Marx rejected these arguments on historical, political and socioeconomic grounds. Aside from the progressive and thoroughly democratic character of his argument, the great significance of Marx's analysis is that he considers the Jewish question within the framework of the socioeconomic development of bourgeois society as a whole. While those passages in Marx's works that identify Judaism with the more vulgar aspects of commercial life are seized upon by anti-Marxists as proof of his malice toward Jews, the

fact is that Marx was addressing himself to a well-known historically determined phenomenon.

Of course, in the universal association of Jews with commerce and huckstering there was a huge element of stereotyping. But underlying this stereotype, which Marx did not invent, was the objective socioeconomic role imposed upon Jews by Christian society under conditions of developing capitalism. At any rate, as Marx was at pains to explain, the forms of economic activity that had in the Middle Ages been associated with Jews had long since become universal with the emergence and maturation of capitalist relations within Christian Europe.

In this sense, the objective, if not theological, basis for the antithesis of Christian and Jew had been dissolved. Thus, the essay concludes that the social liberation of Christians and Jews requires their common liberation from capitalism.

While the metaphorical association of Judaism with capitalism jars modern sensibilities, intellectual integrity demands that Marx's work be read in context. Those who seize on the essay to peddle their reactionary anti-Marxist and anti-socialist political agendas are entirely lacking in such integrity.

The source from which you obtained your skewed appreciation of Marx's essay is a case in point. You are citing from an article entitled "Karl Marx: Anti-Semite," by James B. Whisker. I will not waste my time refuting his lies, because the value of his arguments can be adequately judged simply by noting that Whisker's article appeared on the web site of the Journal of Historical Review.

In case you have not taken the time to review the contents of this "journal," permit me to point out that it is a mouthpiece of Hitler admirers and Holocaust deniers. You will find posted on its web site such pieces as "The 'Holocaust' Put in Perspective," by one Austin J. App, who writes: "Those who throw around large numbers, like six million gassed, four million in Auschwitz, two million by mobile units in Russia, let them come up with the proofs—the graves, the bones, the ashes ... [I]t seems up to us Revisionists to show that the figure of six million is a totally unsubstantiated, brazen lie."

I do not believe that these are people to whom you should turn for an interpretation of Marx's writings.

Yours sincerely,

David North
WSWS Editorial Board



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