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Summary: The film "Lincoln" shows the radicalization that had taken place in Civil War America by January 1865, with the Lincoln administration allying itself with the Radical Republicans to end slavery. At the same time, this Hollywood epic ignores both the economic/class dimensions and the warm exchange of letters between Marx's First International and the Lincoln administration during the very same weeks that are the subject of the film — Editors

Spielberg's "Lincoln," Karl Marx, and the Second American Revolution

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Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln" zeroes in on a single, crucial month of the U.S. Civil War, a conflict that amounted to a second American revolution. In January 1865, as the Union victory over the Confederacy is just months away, President Abraham Lincoln decides to push through the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S Constitution, abolishing slavery unconditionally and without compensation to the slaveowners. This is a far different Lincoln than the candidate of 1860, who refused to campaign as an abolitionist, or the president who delayed issuing the Emancipation Proclamation until almost the third year of the Civil War, in 1863. It is a Lincoln who has grown with the times, whose armies now include 200,000 Black troops, and whose speeches are beginning to hint at citizenship and voting rights for the former slaves.

Revolutionary America

With a screenplay by the noted leftist writer Tony Kushner ("Angels in America," "Homebody/Kabul"), Spielberg's film focuses not only on Lincoln himself, but also on an unquestionably revolutionary figure, the radical abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens, with whom Lincoln allied himself in those fateful days of January 1865. Some of the most dramatic scenes portray Stevens's exchanges with the pathologically racist New York Congressman Fernando Wood, leader of the anti-abolition wing of the Congress.

In another scene, Stevens lays out to a skeptical Lincoln the Radical Republican program of a prolonged military occupation of the South, during which time the former slaves would attain full political rights including holding the highest elected offices, and the landholdings of the former slaveowners would be confiscated and given as land grants to the former slaves (the famous "40 acres and a mule"). All of this is conveyed in moving fashion via some superb acting on the part

of Daniel Day Lewis (Lincoln) and even more so, Tommie Lee Jones (Stevens), with an important contribution by Sally Field (Mary Todd Lincoln) as well.

At the same time, however, the seamy side of U.S. democracy, even as these revolutionary changes are being enacted, is seen in the sordid patronage politics that is used to procure the last few votes to pass the amendment and send it out to the states for final ratification.

As a whole, "Lincoln" offers up a decidedly more anti-slavery and anti-racist perspective on the Civil War in the U.S. than has been common in major Hollywood films. It eschews the usual Hollywood portrayal of the Southern side as morally equivalent, if not superior, to the North. Instead, the film focuses on slavery and racism as the central issue in the Civil War, while also showing a revolutionary leader like Stevens in an unaccustomed positive light. Moreover, the specious Southern argument about "state's rights" is unmasked, showing its true content as the "right" of white people to enslave millions of their fellow human beings.

Economic and Class Dimensions of Abolition

Some on the left have criticized the film's failure to emphasize the struggle for self-emancipation of African-Americans, as seen in for example in the 1989 film "Glory," which told the story of African-American soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.

While those criticisms are valid and important ones, I would like to focus on two other issues not covered by the film, the economic importance of slavery and abolition, and the exchange of letters between Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln, which occurred during the same month of January 1865 that is the focus of the film. These issues could easily have been taken up without altering the angle from which the film views these momentous historical events, that of rival political elites rather than masses in motion. Of course, the latter influence the former, and vice-versa, but I am engaging here in more of an immanent critique, one that takes the film on its own terms and looks at some contradictions that emerge from that.

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865 that made the 1863 war measure permanent were different from other emancipation laws that had been enacted elsewhere. For example, the U.S. emancipation policy precluded any financial compensation to the former slaveowners. Here, it differed even from the pioneering British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which provided vast sums for compensation. In this sense, it was more similar to the French Jacobin abolition of 1794, rescinded by Napoleon a decade later, but which helped touch off the Haitian revolution.

Moreover, slavery was even more central to the U.S. economy than to that of Britain or France. The nearly four million slaves in the U.S. in 1860 constituted about 13% of the overall population, suffering under an utterly dehumanized form of capitalism that allowed human beings to be bought and sold as chattel. At an average price of $500 each, the U.S. slaveowners' human "property" was worth about $2 billion, an astronomical sum in the 1860s. Thus, the abolition of slavery without

compensation in the U.S. constituted the largest expropriation of capitalist private property until the Russian revolution of 1917. It wiped out at a stroke an entire social class, the plantation owners of the South, who had for centuries stood astride an immense accumulation of wealth derived from the production of sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other commodities, and also from the purchase and sale of another commodity, the slaves themselves.

Abolition also added millions of formally free workers to the U.S. working class, enhancing the possibility of class unity across racial and ethnic lines, far easier now than when slave labor coexisted with formally free labor. While only a small measure of that unity across racial lines was achieved in the war's aftermath, and then only briefly, this issue remains more than ever on the agenda, as the U.S. working class of today is increasingly composed of people of color, primarily African-American and Latino/as.

While the film ignores these class and economic realities in favor of the political dimension, they did not escape Karl Marx. In a letter of November 29, 1864, just weeks after the founding of the First International (International Working Men's Association), he intoned, "three and a half years ago, at the time of Lincoln's election, the problem was making no further concessions to the slaveholders, while now the abolition of slavery is the avowed and in part already realized aim," adding that "never has such a gigantic upheaval taken place so rapidly. It will have a beneficent effect on the whole world" (Saul Padover, ed., *Karl Marx on America and the Civil War*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972, p. 272, trans. slightly altered).

Marx's Open Letter to Lincoln

As mentioned above, the month of January 1865, when Lincoln moved to the left, allying himself with Stevens, was also the month in which Marx and Lincoln had their public exchange of letters. After the publication of the First International's "Inaugural Address" (penned by Marx) and its "General Rules" of membership, both in November 1864, its next public statement was an open letter to Lincoln congratulating him on his landslide victory in the November 1864 election. The letter to Lincoln was also drafted by Marx and signed by a large group of labor and socialist activists that included "Karl Marx, Corresponding Secretary for Germany."

At the time, the U.S. Embassy in London was headed by Charles Francis Adams, a Massachusetts abolitionist from one of the U.S.'s most illustrious political families. Adams was undoubtedly aware of some of those involved in the International, as he had been sending his son Henry to observe and report upon meetings that British workers had been organizing since 1862 in order to undercut calls by British politicians and mainstream media to intervene on the side of the South. Those meetings featured many of the future leaders of the International. And the presence of the wealthy young Henry Adams at those meetings would surely have been most visible among the working class attendees. Besides its information-gathering purposes, the presence of the Ambassador's son may also have been intended as an appeal to the British working class over the heads of their government.

In December 1864, the International proposed that a forty-member workers' delegation deliver the letter and be received by the Embassy. While this was declined by Ambassador Adams, the International's "Address to President Lincoln" was delivered to the Embassy, and also published in several newspapers linked to the British labor movement. It read in part:

"We congratulate the American people upon your re-election by a large majority. If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery." (This letter, its reply by Lincoln, and other related texts have been reprinted in Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln*, London: Verso, 2011.)

It continued: "From the commencement of the titanic American strife the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class."

The latter sentence referred not only to the deep anti-slavery sentiments of the British working classes of the time, and to the mass meetings they had organized in support of the North, even when the dominant politicians and media were telling them that if they supported a British intervention to break Lincoln's blockade of Southern ports, then cotton could flow across the seas again, ending the massive unemployment brought about by that same blockade. That sentence about a link between the fate of the U.S. and that of the working classes of Europe was also rooted in a brute fact. The working class of Britain (and even more so on the Continent) was disenfranchised due to property qualifications and it looked to the U.S. as the only large experiment in political democracy of the time. The result was one of the finest examples ever seen of proletarian internationalism.

As Marx noted during these mobilizations of British labor early in the war: "The true people of England, of France, of Germany, of Europe, consider the cause of the United States as their own cause, as the cause of liberty, and that, despite all paid sophistry, they consider the soil of the United States as the free soil of the landless millions of Europe, as their land of promise, now to be defended sword in hand, from the sordid grasp of the slaveholder…. The peoples of Europe know that the Southern slaveocracy commenced that war with the declaration that the continuance of slaveocracy was no longer compatible with the continuance of the Union. Consequently, the people of Europe know that a fight for the continuance of the Union is a fight against the continuance of the slaveocracy — that in this contest the highest form of popular self-government till now realized is giving battle to the meanest and most shameless form of man's enslaving recorded in the annals of history" (Marx, "The London Times and Lord Palmerston, *New-York Tribune*, October 21, 1861).

Marx's letter to Lincoln on behalf of the International also stated: "While the workingmen, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true

freedom of labor, or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation; but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war."

Lincoln's Public Reply to Marx

On January 28, 1865, to the surprise and delight of Marx and other members of the International, the U.S. Embassy issued a public reply by Ambassador Adams to the International. In a letter to Engels of February 10, Marx fairly crowed, noting that Lincoln had chosen to issue a substantive reply not to his liberal British congratulators but to the working class and the socialists: "The fact that Lincoln answered us so courteously and the '**Bourgeois Emancipation Society'** so brusquely and purely formally made *The Daily News so* indignant that they did *not* print the answer to us... The difference between Lincoln's answer to us and to the bourgeoisie has created such a sensation here that the West End 'clubs' are shaking their heads at it. You can understand how gratifying that has been for our people."

Although the reply to the International was signed by Ambassador Adams, he made very clear that Lincoln had read their letter and that Adams was speaking in his name, not merely his own: "I am directed to inform you that the address of the Central Council of your Association, which was duly transmitted through this Legation to the President of the United States, has been received by him."

Given the events of January 1865 covered in the film, during which Lincoln was in the thick of rounding up votes for the Thirteenth Amendment, it becomes even more remarkable that he took the time to issue such a reply. And by a strange and moving confluence of events, Lincoln's reply to the International was made public just three days before the U.S. House of Representatives overcame the obstructions of numerous racist politicians and voted, on January 31, to ratify the Amendment and send it to the states for final ratification.

Lincoln's reply also refers at a general level to "friends of humanity and progress throughout the world" on whom the U.S. was relying, a hint at the way in which those assemblies of British workers, who lacked the vote due to property qualifications for suffrage, had been so crucial in blocking British moves toward intervention on the side of the South during the early years of the war. This hint was made clearer by the last sentence, which stated that the U.S. government was able to "derive new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies." It is hard to recall another juncture at which the U.S. government publicly thanked the international working class for its support, let alone a working class organization headed by socialists.

Unfinished Revolutions: 1860s and 1960s

This exchange between Marx and Lincoln gives a dramatic illustration of the fact of the Civil War as a second American revolution, far more radical than the first one, in 1776. It was to be sure a

bourgeois rather than a socialist revolution, but its left wing's espousal – ultimately unsuccessful -- of a fundamental transformation of landed property in the South hinted at something more radical still. This revolution's unfinished character, wherein it stopped at the political emancipation of the former slaves, and then, after 1876, largely rescinded even that, is something that still haunts the United States of America to this day.

In an eerie parallel, the Civil Rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, which finally achieved on a more permanent basis what had been established all too briefly by the laws and constitutional amendments of the 1860s and 1870s, was also forced by events to stop at political emancipation. This leaves us today with the paradoxical result that the U.S has its first African-American president at the same time that more African-American men and women than ever in its history are languishing nearly forgotten in in the dehumanized world of U.S. prisons and jails.

And the film "Lincoln," which does not address these issues either, is in many ways unfinished as well. Even on its own terms, viewing history from an angle that highlights events among the political elite rather than the masses to which they were responding, it stops short of pursuing its own most radical implications to the end, as for example in its portrayal of the Radical Republican program of Stevens. But it is a sign of the times, of deep transformations in U.S. society and culture, that a mainstream Hollywood film would reveal even a portion of this page of revolutionary history, which, as Marx noted, had an "effect on the whole world."

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