

# Marx falsified and emasculated on the essential question of class

**HEWAT BEUKES** responds to an article in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper

*The article reproduced below expressing the class position of an Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) MP appeared in the Mail & Guardian newspaper in South Africa. Ironically, it is an article which exposes the tribal petit bourgeois method of dividing the working class. We need to answer this article in its essential conjectures.*

A cursory perusal of Marx's writings will show that it is simply not true that Marx deliberately glossed over the race question. In fact Marx showed in all its profoundness that where national and/or race oppression is present the working class can only emancipate itself after the freedom of the race and/or the nation. Lenin took this further in his "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" by showing that the working class can only unite and emancipate itself through a conscious struggle against such race and/or national oppression.

It is in this vein that Trotsky gave the choice to the South African white workers, either with the black working class or with imperialism. More cannot be said of the Marxist attitude to racism and particular oppression of sections of the class.

Karl Marx examined the historical development of human society as a scientist with the aim of acting upon it to change it, not only to interpret it. In the process he uncovered amongst others, the social forces and the laws driving this development. Amongst them, he identified the central force as

the struggle of the classes.

In capitalism he examined the process of the creation of value. He laid bare the social and property relations engendered by this capitalist production process of commodities. He examined the essential contradictory nature of these social and property relations which drives the conflict between the classes. He examined in the most minute detail the nature of labour including wage and chattel slavery and their impact on production of wealth, and the struggle of the working class. He even distinguished between the form and economic effects of ancient slavery and the trade with African slaves.

In his studies and analysis of class he did not find the national and/or race question a separate issue of interest, but a fundamental issue to be overcome by the revolutionary working class movement as of objective necessity of which moral or any other subjective considerations would naturally be concomitant, but not the departure.

This becomes clear in the following two quotes from Marx:

**Letter of K. Marx to A. Vogt in New York London April 9, 1870:**  
*But the English bourgeoisie has, besides, much more important interests in Ireland's present-day economy. Owing to the constantly increasing concentration of tenant-farming, Ireland steadily supplies its own surplus to the English labor market, and thus forces down wages and lowers the moral and material condition of the English working class. And most important of all! Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination*

over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it. But the evil does not stop here. It continues across the ocean. The antagonism between English and Irish is the hidden basis of the conflict between the United States and England. It makes any honest and serious co-operation between the working classes of the two countries impossible. It enables the governments of both countries, whenever they think fit, to break the edge off the social conflict by their mutual bullying, and, in case of need, by war with one another. England, being the metropolis of capital, the power which has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the present the most important country for the workers' revolution, and moreover the only country in which the material conditions for this revolution have developed up to a certain degree of maturity. Therefore to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Workingmen's Association. **The sole means of hastening it is to make Ireland independent.**

Excerpt from K. Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I (Chapter X, Section 7) "In the United States of North America, every independent movement for the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. **Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.** But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. **The first fruit of the Civil**

***War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.***

It is clear from these quotes that to eliminate the race and national questions from Marxian science of class analysis is to stultify it, to pour concrete in its joints and render it meaningless and a futile exercise as in terms of Marx himself no revolution will emancipate the wage slave without addressing race and national oppression.

The EFF MP's position therefore seeks no less than to emasculate Marxism as the science of working class struggle and revolution. It seeks to do so without facts, by disregarding the written fact and replace it with fiction. It is the petit bourgeois method of renouncing Marx and Marxism.

Fanon was not a Marxist. He treated racism as a thing in itself, some inherent psychological response from whites against blacks. He could perhaps be described as a black nationalist in essence. He was not concerned with the economic implications of racism and its relation to and effect on the class struggle. He was occupied by racism as an empirical manifestation, and not by racial exploitation as a variant form of labour for the creation of value, and he brought to bear on it subjective evaluations rather than scientifically founded expositions.

Two quotes illustrate this point:

"The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation."

"When people like me, they like me "in spite of my color." When they dislike me; they point out that it isn't because of my color. Either way, I am locked in to the infernal circle."

It is clear that Fanon either did not read Marx, did not understand him or simply disregarded his work. From the

Marxian quotes above it is clear that Fanon could not form a Triad with Marx and Lenin. Moreover, he does not approach the race question as an analyst or scientist, but as a victim.

The end result was as it is with all revisions, distortions and perversions of science, he could not put forward a relevant programme for the emancipation of the colonial working classes. With such a psychological baggage Fanon could not possibly reach at internationalism as a precondition for working class (and race) emancipation. He landed at guerrillaism of the peasantry, a class which Marxists consider the breeding place of individualist production, the embryo of capitalism if it develops outside the leadership control of the working class.

This was the model on which Southern African liberation movements built their incumbencies with dire consequences for the working class. This was done in full approval of the imperialists. In a central square in Harare a huge statue of a peasant with a sickle in his hand stare fiercely and derisively down on workers passing through or having their meals. The radio and media used to lambast them for their purported bourgeois values and individualism while the peasants had selflessly sacrificed for independence. It was never true. In Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique the urban proletariat provided the centralisation and organisation for the liberation movement. Due to the need to scupper national self-determination imperialism and Stalinism wrested control away from them.

The intimation from black or race nationalists that imperialism and capitalism had some innate psychological partiality to race is belied by history of South Africa itself: During the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902 about 30,000 Boers mostly women and children died in the British concentration camps. Nothing equalled this in the 400-year colonial history of South Africa in terms of racial brutality. It was surpassed in extent only in neighbouring Namibia during

1904-8 with the near extermination of the Herero and the Nama nations for resisting subjugation and exploitation and not on the basis of racist compulsions.

The ease of the merger of black and white in their collective exploitation of the black and white workers and their collective hatred of the black working class as revealed in Marikana put the issue beyond doubt.

This is actually a phenomenon which was not understood by Fanon. Throughout the several hundred-year epoch of capitalist race exploitation, the emergent African feudal and tribal ruling classes were an indispensable part of that process. Basil Davidson in his "In The Eye of the Storm" relates how the ruling castes of the Central African Kingdom amongst others traded with slaves with European colonisers of the Americas. Likewise imperialism in post-colonial Southern Africa needed the tribal royalties and black petit bourgeoisie for its continuation.

We now turn to South Africa itself. The issues surrounding "black consciousness" – the central theme of the article – have been wracking Southern Africa since around 1970. A black consciousness movement which rejected any compromise with the white ruling class took root at the time. Steve Bantu Biko became its iconic leader. It essentially shunned class analyses, but it demanded no less than a proportional appropriation of the economic resources as a basis of any conciliation between white and black.

This militant black nationalism was counteracted by a "non-racial" alliance of black nationalists and the liberal bourgeoisie which eclipsed black consciousness in the 1980's with the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), an ANC front. (During this period the ANC and the SWAPO were liquidating thousands of young activists in exile including the youth who had fled Namibia during 1974 and South Africa in 1976 and its aftermath.) The UDF's black-white unity was

condition less and they eclipsed the militants which had no class analysis and defence for their purported "reverse racism" against the former's pragmatic unity. Of course, factors that assisted in the demise of the militants were the billions pumped into the promotion of the bourgeois alliance by imperialism, through the Anti-Apartheid Movement and physical elimination. Steve Biko is the most notable example of this physical annihilation by the South African State.

Epigones of the black consciousness proponents remain in South Africa. But, unlike their progenitors, they are eclectic and responsible for the attempts to fragment the working class in tribal and national groups and strata. Of course this is inevitable if one responds to class oppression in race and tribal terms. This position has much to do with the outlook of the petit bourgeoisie in general, the tribal petit bourgeoisie in particular.

There can be no doubt that the production of surplus value and its expropriation is the central objective of the capitalist. There can thus be no doubt that racial exploitation of labour is a sub-relation of class exploitation.

But, in South Africa there is no longer exploitation based on race enforced by law.

There remain no institutional obstacles to the unity of the South African working class.

The task is now to strengthen the United Front with NUMSA and to take it forward to build a revolutionary party for Southern Africa which shall seek unity with the international working class movement. This unity will be obtained within the struggle to redeem the true history of the working class.

*By Hewat Beukes, Oct. 2014*

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## **“Class theory finally decolonized**

26 Sep 2014 00:00 [Andile Mngxitama](#)

Fanon creates a triad with Marx and Lenin, to help the EFF reclaim class from its racist foundations.

We need Frantz Fanon, the black thinker of anti-racism, to keep in check the European sensibilities of the first two (Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx) in the holy triumvirate. (Supplied)

Ironically, “class” a putatively combative analytical category in the Marxian tradition, has been one of the most effective means to hide race oppression in racist and colonial societies.

This claim would surprise many because class, as a Marxist tool of analysis, seeks to identify more precisely the workings of capitalism and also to identify the social strata imbued with the capacity and interest to carry out the task of being the “grave diggers” of capitalism – those who would usher in the socialist society where suffering will cease to exist. That was Karl Marx’s fantasy in any event.

The problem is that Marx was trapped in the Eurocentric, anti-black racism of his time. This truth is part of the DNA of his philosophy. Marx’s racist, mechanical thinking on the movement of history leads him to call for the colonisation of nonEuropean worlds to hasten the march towards communist nirvana. So, the foundation of class theory is anti-black.

Class analysis needs be decolonised and subjected to anti-racist analysis if it’s going to serve black people. The hegemony of white thought has ensured the acceptance of class unquestioningly. In our universities, which are dominated by Western thought, class is seen as a scientific category,

whereas race is considered a mere epiphenomena, a derivative of class, or even a non-category of “social constructionism”.

From the above, the conclusion is drawn that race does not exist. Blacks cease to exist because, as we hear, class is the fundamental contradiction. But black radical thinkers such as Frank Wilderson have shown that class cannot account fully for black suffering, which exceeds the capitalist exploitation and alienation that affect white workers.

Black suffering also includes “fungibility”, the idea that one doesn’t just sell one’s labour power as white workers do, but that one is sold as a commodity. White workers could buy themselves a black person off an auction block during the days of slavery, and they are known to have done so. This is over and above the fact that white workers benefit from the exploitation of blacks.

In South Africa, the early Afrikaner proletariat had access to the slave labour of Africans. Basically, they were workers who owned workers; the story of inboekselings – the African slaves of the trekboere – is still to be told.

### **Bad history**

In South Africa, class reductionism has a bad history. White Marxists insisted on it as a choice weapon to avoid accounting for their complicity in black oppression. Often, the insistence on class instead of race in anti-black, racist societies actually meant the defence of the settler colony.

In South Africa this led to the bizarre situation where black people were trained to deny white oppression and say they were oppressed by an abstract, impersonal “system”, not white people.

This saw guerrilla insurgents sent back from exile at great personal risk to destroy “economic installations” and to take care not to harm white people in the process.

We ended with a war without a war when on the side of the white oppressor, the black person was the actual subject of exploitation and violent repression, as demonstrated by the occupation of the townships by the army and police, hit squads and long-term jail sentences, if not capital punishment. White oppression was personal, the Marxist response was impersonal.

There is a bitter truth to face: to be a class warrior or even a Marxist doesn't mean one is above anti-black racism. The dramatic resignation of Aimé Césaire from the French Communist Party in 1957 shows this reality in clear terms.

Césaire, who was protesting the reality that Marxism was put to racist use, poignantly stated: "What I want is that Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black people, and not black people in the service of Marxism and communism."

At times when listening to black people who have assumed Marxism, one can't fail to notice how their entry to the thought process requires that they deny themselves as black people.

### **Triad of Marx, Lenin and Fanon**

Up to now difficulties of class theory have not been decisively resolved. The self-description by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) as a "Marxist-Leninist-Fanonian" party presents a refreshing attempt to decolonise the anti-capitalist struggle. This triad of Marx, Lenin and Frantz Fanon is recognition that Marxist-Leninism in racist societies falls short of the task of emancipation.

We need Fanon, the black thinker of anti-racism, to keep in check the European sensibilities of the first two in the holy triumvirate.

As far as we know, it's the first time that a political movement has explicitly expressed its ideological framework in this way.

Fanon, a student of Césaire, was to turn the Marxist schema upside down, almost as profoundly as Marx had done with Friedrich Hegel.

Fanon argued that in colonial settings, “Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched” because, he argued, “the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich”.

The EFF’s ideological innovation introduces a productive tension that may contribute towards developing a theory and practice of emancipation that reclaims class from its racist foundations and decolonises it in the service of black emancipation.

Class is too important to be left to racists to misuse at will in the defence of white supremacy.

*Andile Mngxitama, an EFF MP, is co-editor of Biko Lives! to be launched on September 26, and is the founding editor of New Frank Talk, a journal on the black condition. He writes in his personal capacity”*