No socialism without slavery, war as a great communal work.

Addendum to my critique of Marx

by Andreas Peglau

In "People as puppets? How Marx and Engels suppressed the real psyche in their teaching" I demonstrated, using his endorsement of child labor as an example, that Marx's belief in progress could lead to inhumane conclusions.[1] In the "Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional Central Council" of the International Workingmen's Association, written by Marx in 1866, it was stated:

> "We regard the tendency of modern industry to enlist children and adolescents of both sexes in the great work of social production as a progressive, healthy, and justified tendency, although the manner in which this tendency is realized under the rule of capital is abhorrent."[2]

As Marx knew and had documented himself on several occasions, every month of child labor cost thousands of children their health or their lives. Nevertheless, as late as 1875, he still considered a "general ban on child labor" to be

> "incompatible with the existence of large-scale industry and therefore nothing more than a pious wish. Its implementation—if possible—would be reactionary, since, with strict regulation of working hours according to different age groups and other precautionary measures to protect children, the early combination of productive work with education is one of the most powerful means of transforming today's society."[3]

Marx must have known how futile adequate child protection was in the capitalism of 1875, especially within "large-scale industry." Yet he gave priority to the future social transformation he hoped for over the real child poverty of his time.

The fact that a *fundamental* stance on the part of Marx and Engels came into play here is evident in their treatment of other, no less controversial topics.

On December 28, 1846, Marx wrote to the Russian publicist Pavel Annenkov: "*Freedom* and *slavery* constitute an antagonism. […] As for slavery, I need not speak of its negative aspects. The only thing that needs to be explained is the positive side of slavery." By this he meant the "direct slavery […] of Black people in Suriname, in Brazil, and in the Southern states of North America." This, he argued, is

> "the linchpin of our modern industry, just as much as machines, credit, etc. Without slavery, no cotton; without cotton, no modern industry. It was slavery that gave the colonies their value; it was the colonies that created world trade; and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry. Thus, before the slave trade, the colonies of the Old World supplied very few products and did not noticeably change the face of the world. Consequently, slavery is an economic category of the utmost importance. Without slavery, North America—the most advanced country—would be transformed into a patriarchal society. Remove North America from the world map, and you have anarchy, the complete collapse of trade and modern civilization. But to do away with slavery would mean removing America from the world map."[4]

In 1877, Engels published "Anti-Dühring" (*Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft / Mr. Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science)*.[5] Regarding this work, the editors of the Marx-Engels Works noted that Marx "took a direct part in its creation" and contributed a chapter, so that "the ‚Anti-Dühring' expressed, from beginning to end, the standpoint […] of Engels and Marx."[6]

Engels also addressed the topic of slavery here.

Herrn Eugen Dühring's
Umwälzung der Wissenschaft.
Von
Friedrich Engels.
I.
II.
Politischer Oekonomie. Sozialismus

He began by considering a long-past state of affairs in which it had become possible for the first time for agricultural families to "incorporate one or more outside laborers":

"But their own community and the confederation to which it belonged did not provide any available, surplus workers. War, on the other hand, provided them, and war was as old as the simultaneous existence of several communal groups side by side. Until then, people had not known what to do with prisoners of war, so they had simply killed them; even earlier, they had eaten them. But at the stage of the 'economic situation' now reached, they acquired a value; so they were allowed to live, and their labor was put to use. […] *Slavery* had been invented."[7]

According to Engels, then, "the simultaneous existence of several communal groups" led to wars—an assumption that, based on current knowledge, is just as false[8] as the one regarding the original practice of killing or even eating prisoners of war.[9]
Engels now contextualized the invention of slavery:

> "It was slavery alone that made the division of labor between agriculture and industry possible on a larger scale, and with it the flourishing of the ancient world, Greek civilization. Without slavery, there would have been no Greek state, no Greek art and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the foundation of Greek civilization and the Roman Empire, there would also be no modern Europe. We should never forget that our entire economic, political, and intellectual development presupposes a state of affairs in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally accepted. In this sense, we are justified in saying: Without ancient slavery, there would be no modern socialism."[10]

Later, he states that anyone who "turns up their nose at Greek civilization because it was founded on slavery" could "accuse the Greeks, with equal justification, of not having steam engines or electric telegraphs."[11]
In response to the expected outrage at this line of reasoning, Engels countered:

> "It is all too easy to rail against slavery and the like in general terms and to pour out high moral indignation over such infamy. Unfortunately, this says nothing more than what everyone already knows, namely that these ancient institutions no longer correspond to our present-day conditions and to the feelings shaped by those conditions."[12]

Aversion to slavery merely as modern sentimentalism? Even Diogenes, the ancient philosopher well known to Marx and Engels, criticized slavery.[13]
Might not the slaves themselves have always harbored strongly negative feelings toward their enslavement? Yet Engels glossed over this as well:

> "Even for the slaves, this was a step forward; the prisoners of war, from whom the bulk of the slaves were recruited, now at least retained their lives, whereas previously they had been murdered or, even earlier, roasted."[14]

Slavery as the best possible solution for all involved.

That the present would look different—or would not have come about at all—without what came before is, in turn, a platitude. To conclude from this, however, that everything that came before had to be that way is simply nonsense. Or a belief in divine predestination. For Marx and Engels, it was a belief in "economic laws of nature" that acted in a god-like manner.[15]
Engels continued his argument:

> "But this tells us nothing about how these institutions arose, why they existed, and what role they played in history. And if we examine this, we must say—as contradictory and heretical as it may sound—that the introduction of slavery was a great step forward under the circumstances of the time."[16]

The calculation made by Engels and Marx was always the same: everything that happens and has happened in human history is determined by the economic laws that Marx was the first to recognize. These laws bring about an inevitable social advance that ultimately tends toward socialism. Therefore, anything that enabled or facilitated this progress (and confirmed the theses of Marx and Engels) was to be welcomed.
The fact that millions of people fell victim to this kind of "progress" apparently seemed to them not only inevitable but also of secondary importance.[17]
This perspective was also evident in their assessment of wars.[18]
In 1846, the United States invaded Mexico and annexed nearly half the country, including Texas, New California, and New Mexico. Thousands of Mexicans were killed[19]—a fact that must have been known by 1848, when Engels, presumably also on behalf of Marx, commented on this invasion:

> "In *America*, we watched the conquest of Mexico and rejoiced at it. It is also a step forward that a country which until now had been preoccupied exclusively with itself, torn apart by perpetual civil wars and prevented from any development—a country that, at best, was destined to fall into industrial vassalage to England—that such a country is forcibly drawn into the historical movement. It is in the interest of its own development that it be placed under the tutelage of the United States in the future. It is in the interest of the development of all of America that the United States, through its possession of California, maintain dominance over the Pacific Ocean."[20]

Of course, wars can also lead to something that can be classified as positive. But it would never occur to me to say that World War II had the *good* side of leading to the subsequent founding of the UN. Nor would I, in hindsight, *rejoice* over Hitler's Germany's invasion of the USSR in 1941—which ultimately claimed the lives of 27 million Soviet citizens—simply because it led to the destruction of the Nazi empire.
If a man's head is cut off, he no longer has to shave. That is true—but it is no reason to regard the entire event as something to be celebrated.
I would like to add five quotes from Marx that further illustrate his view on war and peace.[21] The last two are taken from Volume 1 of *Capital*; the first three are from *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy)*, completed in 1858 and published posthumously. Marx noted these down only as a partly sketchy "rough draft" for personal use. Nevertheless, they shed light on his train of thought.

> "*War* earlier than peace [sic]."[22]
> "War is therefore the great communal work [!], the great collective labor that is required, whether to occupy the objective conditions of living existence or to protect and perpetuate the occupation of those conditions. The community, consisting of families, is therefore initially organized along warlike lines."[23]
> "The hunting ground is thus the case among the wild Indian tribes in America; the tribe regards a certain region as its hunting ground and defends it by force against other tribes or seeks to

> drive other tribes out of the territory they claim. […] The only barrier the community can encounter in its treatment of the natural conditions of production—the earth—[…] as *its own,* is *another community,* which is already […] claiming it. *War* is therefore one of the most primordial activities of each of these naturally formed communities, both for the assertion of property and for its new acquisition."[24]
> "Linguet[25] […] may not be wrong when he declares hunting to be the first form of cooperation and the hunting of humans (war) to be one of the first forms of hunting."[26]
> "As is well known, conquest, subjugation, robbery, and murder—in short, violence—play a major role in real history."[27]

In the article „Das Ende des Bellizismus. Krieg und Frieden im Werk von Friedrich Engels," ("The End of Bellicism: War and Peace in the Work of Friedrich Engels") published in 2020[28], political scientist Georg Fülberth summarizes:

> "For most of their political lives, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were what we would probably call 'bellicists' today. Like almost all their contemporaries, they followed the thinking of the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, according to whom war is the continuation of politics by other means. These were considered controllable, and war was therefore deemed winnable.
> In 1848–49, Marx and Engels called for a German people's war against the Russian tsar. In their eyes, he was the mainstay of all reactionary regimes and—after his army crushed the Hungarian uprising—the butcher of the revolution. Engels accused the British government of failing to pursue the Crimean War (1853–1856) to Russia's final defeat—out of concern for the European balance of power and fear of revolutionary consequences. For a long time, he leveled a similar accusation against the Northern states in the American Civil War (1861–1865)."

If "bellicists" are understood to mean people who glorify war, this does not apply to Marx and Engels. If, however, the term refers to viewing war as a legitimate means of achieving political goals, then Fülberth is correct: both Engels and Marx advocated armed conflicts that they believed would bring about social progress.[29]
The distinction between "just" and "unjust" wars, which has been debated since ancient times,[30] played no role for them, however. [31]

Fülberth points out that the elderly Engels also came to the realization that,

> "that the era of limited—and thus manageable—military conflicts was over. Now the prospect of a horrific world war was opening up. In March 1889, Engels wrote to Paul Lafargue, a son-in-law of Karl Marx: 'As for war, it is for me the most terrible of all possibilities. […] a war in which there will be ten to 15 million combatants, which, simply to feed them, will bring about unprecedented devastation; a war that will bring about intensified and widespread repression of our movement, a rise in chauvinism in all countries, and ultimately a weakening of our movement, […] a period of reaction resulting from the exhaustion of all the bled-dry peoples—and all this for the slim chance that a revolution might emerge from this bitter war—that horrifies me."

Nevertheless, those who are committed to peace can only invoke Marx and Engels to a limited extent.

***

Last accessed June 23, 2026.

Please cite as **Andreas Peglau (2026): No socialism without slavery; war as a great communal work. Addendum to my critique of Marx** (https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/no-socialism-without-slavery-war-as-a-great-communal-work-addendum-to-my-critique-of-marx/)

© 2026 Andreas Peglau – All rights reserved. Löcknitzer Str. 33, 17309 Pasewalk info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de

This is a DeepL translation I have not checked. I apologize for any errors and inaccuracies that are sure to occur. Please use the original German text for comparison: https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/ohne-sklaverei-kein-sozialismus-krieg-als-grosse-gesamtaufgabe-ergaenzung-zu-meiner-marx-kritik/The forwarding and distribution of this text for *non-commercial* purposes is expressly encouraged. Licensed under a Creative Commons license (Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International).

Notes and Sources

[1] https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/people-as-puppets-how-marx-and-engels-suppressed-the-real-psyche-in-their-teaching-part-8-from-immanuel-kant-to-child-labour/
[2] Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW), Vol. 16, p. 193.
[3] MEW, Vol. 19, p. 32.
[4] MEW, Vol. 27, p. 458. In 1847, in „Das Elend der Philosophie“ (“The Misery of Philosophy”), Marx argued similarly: “*Slavery* […] has […] two sides. Let us not dwell on the bad side, but speak of the beautiful side” (MEW, Vol. 4, p. 131). As with child labor, Marx was well aware of “the bad side” of slavery. He described it on numerous occasions (see https://monthlyreview.org/articles/marx-and-slavery/) and called the modern slave trade “shameful” (MEW, Vol. 12, pp. 507–511).
[5] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-D%C3%BChring
[6] MEW 20, p. VII.
[7] Quotes from „Anti-Dühring“ in MEW 20, pp. 167–169.
[8] See Graeber, D./ Wengrow, D. (2022): Anfänge. Eine neue Geschichte der Menschheit. Stuttgart; https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/we-are-not-born-warriors-on-the-psychosocial-prerequisites-for-peacefulness-and-warlike-behavior/.
[9] Engels does not cite any sources here, but he likely referred to L. H. Morgan, mentioned in the 1885 preface, who assumed that cannibalism was characteristic of the “barbaric” phase (see https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/morgan-lewis/ancient-society/ch02.htm) . Furthermore, contemporary accounts of voyages to the “New World” painted pictures shaped by chauvinistic stereotypes of “primitive savages” (Peter-Röcher, H.: Kannibalismus in der prähistorischen Forschung. Studien zu einer paradigmatischen Deutung und ihren Grundlagen/ Cannibalism in Prehistoric Research. Studies on a Paradigmatic Interpretation and Its Foundations, Bonn 1994, pp. 158–212). Heidi Peter-Röcher, however, found in the sources “from prehistoric, ancient, medieval, and modern times […] no convincing, unequivocal evidence […] that would allow the conclusion that cannibalism ever existed as a socially accepted and practiced custom” (ibid., p. 213). Graeber and Wengrow (as in footnote 8, pp. 207–233) demonstrate in detail that in pre-colonial America, slavery existed only regionally and was practiced in very different ways. There is certainly no question of killing them indiscriminately, let alone eating them.
[10] As in footnote 7.
[11] Ibid., here applied to Dühring.
[12] Ibid.
[13] https://en-wikipedia-org.translate.goog/wiki/Diogenes_or_on_Servants?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=de&_x_tr_hl=de&_x_tr_pto=rq.
[14] As in footnote 7.
[15] See https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/people-as-puppets-how-marx-and-engels-suppressed-the-real-psyche-in-their-teaching-part-6-strange-beings-and-social-laws-of-nature/.
[16] As in footnote 7.
[17] I was unable to determine how, or indeed whether, Marx reconciled this with the “categorical imperative” he had formulated at the age of 25: “to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, forsaken, and despised being.”

[18] On her contradictory stance regarding the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, see: https://marx-engels-revisited.de/2022/07/28/marx-und-engels-und-der-deutsch-franzoesische-krieg-von-1870-71/ This does not detract from the fact that we owe Engels and Marx both novel and essential insights into the causes of wars, especially under capitalism. On Engels' military knowledge and thinking: https://das-blaettchen.de/2017/11/der-general-friedrich-engels-41901.html.
[19] Their number is estimated at 25,000 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican%E2%80%93American_War).
[20] MEW, Vol. 4, p. 501. The editors of this volume of the MEW deemed it necessary to include the following footnote: "Marx and Engels later revised their assessment of this event—based on a thorough study of the history of U.S. aggression against Mexico and other countries on the American continent. Thus, in his 1861 essay 'The North American Civil War,' Marx characterized the policy of the ruling classes of the United States toward the Latin American countries as a policy of conquest, the open aim of which was the acquisition of new territories for the expansion of slavery and the rule of the slaveholders." However, this wrongly suggests that Marx condemned this annexation there or that he and Engels had departed from their earlier assessments: in fact, they merely expanded upon them (see MEW Vol. 15, pp. 329–338).
[21] The respective contexts in which these statements are embedded can be easily researched, since the Marx-Engels Works are available online, for example here: https://marx-wirklich-studieren.net/marx-engels-werke-als-pdf-zum-download/.
[22] On how far removed from reality this view is: https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/we-are-not-born-warriors-on-the-psychosocial-prerequisites-for-peacefulness-and-warlike-behavior/. The 6 million years of human evolution or 300,000 years of Homo sapiens existence stand in contrast to the last 7,000 years, for which there is evidence of wars for the first time. Source of the Marx quote: Introduction to the "Grundrisse," MEW 42, p. 43.
[23] *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, MEW 42, p. 386. For more on this: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grundrisse
[24] Ibid., p. 399.
[25] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon-Nicholas_Henri_Linguet
[26] Capital, Vol. I, MEW 23, p. 353, footnote 23a.
[27] Ibid., p. 742.
[28] https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1145026.krieg-und-frieden-das-ende-des-bellizismus.html.
[29] For more details, see Suvanto, P. (1985): Marx und Engels zum Problem des gewaltsamen Konflikts (Marx and Engels on the Problem of Violent Conflict), Helsinki.
(https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/167584/SH018_opt.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).
[30] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_war_theory. Addendum, July 17, 2026: Anyone who says the following regarding the current global political confrontation: "Capitalist states are active on all sides, there is no actor that is better or worse, I will remain a neutral 'left-wing' observer, maintaining a sovereign 'equidistance'," cannot, therefore, invoke Marx and Engels.
[31] See also Goldschmidt, W. (1999): Gerechter Krieg für eine gerechte Weltordnung? (Just War for a Just World Order?), in *Zeitschrift für marxistische Erneuerung* 1999, Issue 40, pp. 103–121.