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Notes on the early class struggle in America - Part I

History of the Class Struggle

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The birth of the American proletariat

"The discovery of gold and silver in America; the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in the mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterise the dawn of the era of capitalist production."[1]

In bourgeois mythology the first settlers to America were free men and women who built a democratic and egalitarian society from scratch in the New World.

The reality is that the American proletariat was born into bondage and slave labour, faced barbaric punishment if it resisted, and was forced to struggle for its basic rights against a brutal capitalist regime that most resembled a prison without walls.

Capital's slave labour colonies

Eager for their share of the spoils, at the end of the 16th century the mercantile capitalists of the City of London set out to plunder the natural resources of the New World. The first English colonies in North America were capitalist enterprises from the start, where even the Puritan pilgrims who embarked on the *Mayflower* were expected to turn a profit for their wealthy backers. But to exploit this New World capital needed labour.

In Central and South America the Spanish enslaved millions in their thirst for gold. Not finding the expected mineral riches, English capital was forced to turn to the cultivation of the tobacco plant, and for this it needed a huge regimented workforce. The local indigenous people proved too difficult to enslave in sufficient numbers and resisted the violent invasion of their homeland, but fortunately for England's merchant adventurers a supply of labour existed much closer to home; over the preceding centuries the English peasantry had been driven off its land and, in Marx's description, *"turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage labour."*[2]

These terroristic laws were used to banish so-called "persistent rogues" to "parts beyond the seas", which meant that tens of thousands of men, women and children deemed a threat to social order and surplus to domestic capital's needs were simply rounded up and shipped off to work in the tobacco fields of Virginia, where many were worked to death or tortured if they tried to escape. Among the first to be sent were children, half of whom were dead within a year. The largest single group were convicts; and since hanging was the standard punishment for the most trivial offences there was no shortage of 'criminals' who could be granted royal mercy in exchange for transportation to the colonies – although death rates were so high that some pleaded to be hanged instead. Others were in effect political prisoners of the English bourgeoisie in its ruthless struggle for domination of the British Isles. In an operation that bears striking similarities to the 20th century Stalinist gulag, royalist prisoners of war, Quakers, English rebels, Scottish Covenanters, Irish Catholics, Jacobites and dissidents of all kinds were disposed of by being forcibly transported to America to be worked to death as slave labour. Ireland had long been singled out by the English ruling class for this kind of treatment and unknown numbers of Irish men, women and children were sold into slavery before and after Cromwell's bloody conquest and ethnic cleansing.

Nearly two-thirds of all white immigrants to England's American colonies – some 350-375,000 people – arrived as indentured servants, required to work for anything from three up to eleven years or more in return for their passage and basic needs. Indenture is often presented as a benign contractual system. In reality it was a form of time-limited slavery, as well as a highly profitable business for the merchants involved, who employed recruiting agents to waylay, kidnap or lure the unsuspecting into boarding ship for America, where they became the personal property of their owners and could be bought and sold, punished for any disobedience, whipped and branded if they ran away. Many were children. Even if they survived to the end of their bondage they were far more likely to join the ranks of the proletariat than to own one square inch of the New World. [3]

In its insatiable appetite for profit, capital enslaved anyone it could get hold of without discrimination: Africans, Native Americans, English, Scots, Irish, French, Germans, Swiss... The first African slaves arrived in 1619 but until the end of the 18th century the majority of slaves in America were European.

At first, African slaves were treated more like indentured servants and black and white worked side by side in similar conditions. That fraternization between the two was a real tendency is shown by the early laws passed to expressly forbid it, and the ruling class lived in constant fear of a collective uprising of its slave army, especially on the plantations of Virginia.

Despite the harshness of the punishments they faced, black and white slaves showed their refusal to submit by running away together, engaging in acts of sabotage, strikes, slowdowns and other forms of resistance, including attacks on their oppressors. Discontent grew. In 1663 white servants and black slaves in Virginia plotted an insurrection with the aim of overthrowing the governor and setting up an independent republic.[4] This ended in betrayal and the execution of the leaders, who were ex-Cromwellian soldiers sold into servitude.

Veterans of Cromwell's New Model Army were said to be involved in all of the servant uprisings in Virginia,[5] and the persistence of radical ideas from the English revolution was an important influence on the early class struggle in America. "*Levelling* [that is, attacks on the property of the rich with the aim of equalizing wealth] *was to be behind countless actions of poor whites against the rich in all the English colonies, in the century and a half before the Revolution.*"[6] In 1644, for example, during a Puritan-led coup in Catholic Maryland, tenants and servants, both Protestant and Catholic, took the opportunity to expropriate the landlords and divide their property for their own use.[7]

Insurrection and civil war in Virginia

The influence of the English revolution was clearly shown in the 1676 insurrection in Virginia known as 'Bacon's Rebellion'. About a thousand poor white frontiersman, joined by white and black slaves and servants, marched on the capital Jamestown, torched it, and overthrew the colonial government, denouncing its former leaders as "Traytors to the People" and seizing their property. This was by far the largest and most significant struggle in colonial America before the 1776 Revolution, at its height threatening to become a full-blown civil war and spread across the entire Chesapeake region. England almost lost control of its colony and had to send ships and 1000 troops to re-impose imperial rule. In a show of force 23 rebel leaders were hanged.

The immediate cause was the refusal of the colonial governor to retaliate against Indian attacks on frontier settlements, and the insurgents launched their own violent attacks on even friendly Indian tribes. Bacon himself was a landowner and member of the governor's council, and the rebellion was led by planters who found their advancement blocked by the more than usually incompetent and corrupt clique of landed interests around the royalist governor. Other grievances included heavy and misappropriated taxes, low tobacco prices and English restrictions on colonial trade (the Navigation Acts).

But the rebellion also expressed the resentment of poor white frontiersmen, many of them former servants, who had been excluded from lucrative land grants by the greed of the big landowners and gone west, where they inevitably encountered the Indians. The deep (and justified) fear of the ruling faction was that any attempt at retaliation would instead provoke an armed uprising by the labouring classes who, due to a deepening economic crisis, were facing dire poverty and hunger. According to one member of the ruling class at the time the "zealous inclination of the multitude" to support Bacon was due to "hopes of levelling".[8]

White and black slaves and servants also joined the insurrection and were among the last to hold out against English forces; the final surrender of the rebels was by "four hundred English and Negroes in Armes" at one garrison, and three hundred "freemen and African and English

bondservants" in another. About 80 black and 20 white slaves refused to give up their weapons.[9] But there were also mass desertions by the rank and file of both opposing armies, suggesting the proletariat did not unambiguously support either side in this struggle.

As far as it had any coherent ideology or programme, the leadership of 'Bacon's Rebellion' was closest politically to the Independents, the left wing of the bourgeoisie in the 'English Civil War',[10] and saw the insurrection as part of a wider attack on monarchy. Bacon himself appears to have argued for the expulsion of English troops, the overthrow of royal government and the founding of an independent republic with help from England's Dutch and French rivals.

Not surprisingly the insurrection has been seen as a precursor of the American Revolution and we will return to this in the next article. At the time its real significance was as a warning to whole ruling class about the need to deal with the growing threat from the American proletariat. To this end the ruling faction was first allowed to wreak its revenge on the insurgents and indulge in an orgy of executions. Then, with bourgeois order safely restored and the proletariat re-enslaved, the English state removed it from power, curbed the colony's political autonomy and imposed a military-backed government directly controlled by London.

Racism – a deliberate strategy to divide the American proletariat

The ruling class was forced to recognise that its dependence on indentured labour, combined with the greed of the local 'plantocracy' for the best land, was creating a dangerous and ever-expanding class of armed, discontented landless labourers in America. Its longer-term response was therefore to drive a wedge between white and black workers by re-defining slavery in purely racial terms, deeming that black slaves were the property of their masters for life, sanctioning a whole array of barbaric punishments for resistance or escape, including whipping, burning, mutilation and dismemberment. Having institutionalised the racist idea that whites were superior to blacks, it placed white workers in positions of power over black slaves and passed laws to provide white indentured servants who had served their time with supplies and land, in this way hoping to encourage the growth of a new middle class of small planters and independent farmers who would identify on racial grounds with their exploiters and provide a vital buffer against the struggles of black slaves, frontier Indians, and very poor whites.

Thus, racial divisions between black and white were not based on any supposed natural differences but part of a deliberate strategy by the ruling class to prevent the very real threat of black and white workers fighting side by side against their exploiters.

The numbers of African slaves grew rapidly after 1680, spurred by the enormous profits to be made from the Atlantic slave trade, the lower cost to planters of using black slaves, and the dwindling supply of indentured labour as the industrial revolution finally began to absorb landless labourers into domestic capitalist production. By 1750, African slaves had almost entirely replaced European slaves. In fact in some colonies like South Carolina they outnumbered the white population and the ruling class was acutely aware of its precarious position, which demanded not only ruthless suppression of any sign of resistance but also high levels of surveillance and control, together with policies designed to keep its enemies permanently divided.

The methods the bourgeoisie used to control its growing black slave army built on all the lessons it had learned from the previous wave of struggles of servants and slaves, but refined into a system of much greater and more sophisticated barbarity, specifically designed to ensure the slaves' psychological destruction, demeaning, degrading and humiliating them in every way to prevent them from identifying with their own interests against their exploiters:

"*The slaves were taught discipline, were impressed again and again with the idea of their own inferiority to 'know their place,' to see blackness as a sign of subordination, to be awed by the power of the master, to merge their interest with the master's, destroying their own individual needs. To accomplish this there was the discipline of hard labor, the breakup of the slave family, the lulling effects of religion (which sometimes led to 'great mischief,' as one slaveholder reported), the creation of disunity among slaves by separating them into field slaves and more privileged house slaves, and finally the power of law and the immediate power of the overseer to invoke whipping, burning, mutilation, and death.*"[11]

Despite all these obstacles to organising resistance, however, there were around 250 uprisings or plots involving a minimum of ten African slaves before the American Revolution. These were not all simply desperate bids for freedom; some involved white workers as well and were reported as having conscious political aims such as the levelling of property and the overthrow of the master class.[12]

But the efforts of the ruling class to divide the American working class along racial lines ensured that when a wave of black slave uprisings began in the first half of the 18th century it was effectively isolated from the struggles of the rest of the proletariat and white colonists themselves were now targets of black anger.

In the first large-scale revolt in New York in 1712, about 25 to 30 armed slaves set fire to a building and killed nine whites who came on the scene. Most were captured by troops after 24 hours and 21 were executed by being burnt, hanged, or broken on the wheel, with one hung alive in chains as an 'exemplary punishment'.[13]

Further planned or actual uprisings followed, particularly in South Carolina and Virginia, fuelled by famine and economic depression. There are also reports of communities set up by escaped African and Native American slaves in remote areas, such as the settlement in the Blue Ridge Mountains crushed by militia in 1729.

The largest black slave uprising in America before the 1776 revolution was at Stono in South Carolina in 1739. About 20 armed slaves, possibly former soldiers, joined by others until there were perhaps 100 in all, "called out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating" heading for Spanish Florida until they were intercepted by the militia. About 25 whites and 50 slaves were killed and the decapitated heads of the rebels were mounted on stakes along the roads to serve as a warning.[14]

The ruling class deliberately provoked such an atmosphere of suspicion and fear in order to keep black and white proletarians at each others' throats, so that even today it isn't clear whether some slave 'conspiracies' were real or not. But the repression was real enough:

"*In New York in 1741, there were ten thousand whites in the city and two thousand black slaves. It had been a hard winter and the poor – slave and free – had suffered greatly. When mysterious fires broke out, blacks and whites were accused of conspiring together. Mass hysteria developed against the accused. After a trial full of lurid accusations by informers, and forced confessions, two white men and two white women were executed, eighteen slaves were hanged, and thirteen slaves were burned alive.*"[15]

There were further organised slave rebellions during the 1740s but then a marked decline, probably due to a combination of exhaustion after the failure of earlier struggles and the ruthlessness and efficiency of the ruling class in suppressing and controlling its ever growing army of African slaves.

The struggles of 'free' wage slaves

Of course, some did go to America of their own free will. Due to the scarcity of labour, particularly skilled labour, workers could command wages 30 to 100 percent higher than in England. This meant it was often possible for them to win demands for higher pay and better conditions, or, if not, to simply 'desert' and find work elsewhere. But the fear of revolt, and the attempts of the bourgeoisie to control the working class and keep wages low, meant that struggling workers, especially in the cities, quickly came up against the force of the state:

"*As early as 1636, an employer off the coast of Maine reported that his workmen and fishermen 'fell into a mutiny' because he had withheld their wages. They deserted en masse. Five years later, carpenters in Maine, protesting against inadequate food, engaged in a slowdown. At the Gloucester shipyards in the 1640s (...) the 'first lockout in American labor history' took place when the authorities told a group of troublesome shipwrights they could not 'worke a stroke of worke more.'*"

"*There were early strikes of coopers, butchers, bakers, protesting against government control of the fees they charged. Porters in the 1650s in New York refused to carry salt, and carters (truckers, teamsters, carriers) who went out on strike were prosecuted in New York City 'for not obeying the Command and Doing their Dutyes as becomes them in their Places.'*"[16]

The only attempts at permanent organisations in this period were 'friendly societies' along craft lines which often included employers as well as workers. Nevertheless the ruling class viewed these with extreme suspicion and as early as 1680 a combination of coopers in New York City was prosecuted as a criminal enterprise.[17]

With the emergence of the urban working class in the rapidly growing cities, the bourgeoisie increasingly deployed its strategy to reinforce divisions between white and black workers, cultivating the support of white skilled workers by protecting them against competition:

"*As early as 1686, the council in New York ordered that 'noe Negro or Slave be suffered to work on the bridge as a Porter about any goods either imported or Exported from or into this City.' In the southern towns too, white craftsmen and traders were protected from Negro competition. In*

1764 the South Carolina legislature prohibited Charleston masters from employing Negroes or other slaves as mechanics or in handicraft trades."[18]

In this way the bourgeoisie hoped to recruit skilled workers into a new white middle class along with small planters and independent farmers in order to prevent a generalised struggle across racial barriers.

Conclusions

England's first American colonies were clearly established on a capitalist basis; indeed, in Marx's view, societies like North America began at a higher level and developed more rapidly than in Europe, where the rise of capitalism was more encumbered by the social relations of decaying feudal society.[19] If the American proletariat was born into bondage and subjected to forced labour and barbarous treatment, this was nothing exceptional at the rosy dawn of the capitalist mode of production described so vividly by Marx. Early capitalism in North America was based firmly on the regime to control the emerging proletariat already existing in Tudor England, and if Marx spent so much time in Volume 1 of *Capital* cataloguing the 'terroristic laws' that accompanied the expropriation of the English peasantry and its preparation for the world of wage labour, this is because England offered the first and best example of the genesis of industrial capitalism. For capital, the systematic use of the most barbarous methods was absolutely essential to its survival in America given the harshness of conditions, the chronic shortage of labour and the external threats to its existence.

What *is* distinctive about the early class struggle in America, although not unique, is the institutionalisation of black African slavery that led to the division of the early working class along racial lines and the consequent isolation of its struggles. This racial division remained as a hugely significant barrier to the unification of the American proletariat and to its ability to assert its own common interests as a class in capitalist society.

Nevertheless, from its birth the American proletariat showed its willingness to fight back against this terroristic capitalist regime, displaying not only an often desperate courage against all the odds, but also a real capacity for solidarity across racial barriers in the face of common exploitation and oppression, and a developing political consciousness of itself and the ultimate aims of its struggle – which is precisely why the ruling class was forced to adopt such sophisticated strategies and tactics of divide and rule.

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[1] Marx, *Capital vol. 1*, Chapter 31, Penguin, 1976, p.915.
[2] Op. Cit., Chapter 28, p.897.
[3] See D. Jordan & M. Walsh, *White Cargo. The forgotten history of Britain's white slaves in America*, Mainstream, 2007.
[4] Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America*, Harper Torchbook edition, 1965, p.173.

[5] Ibid., p.206.

[6] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, Harper Perennial edition, 2005, p.42.

[7] Edward Toby Terrar, "Gentry Royalists or Independent Diggers? The Nature of the English and Maryland Catholic Community in the Civil War Period of the 1640s," *Science and Society* (New York), vol. 57, no. 3 (1993), pp. 313-348, http://www.angelfire.com/un/tob-art/art-html/18c-ar10.html.

[8] Quoted in Zinn, Op. Cit., p.42.

[9] Ibid., p.55.

[10] See the articles on the "Lessons of the English revolution" in *World Revolution* nos. 325 and 329.

[11] Zinn, Op. Cit., p.35.

[12] Herbert Aptheker*, American Negro Slave Revolts*, International Publishers edition, 1993, pp.162-163.

[13] Ibid., pp.172-173.

[14] Ibid., pp.187-189.

[15] Zinn, Op. Cit., p.37.

[16] Ibid., p.50.

[17] Morris, Op. Cit., p.159.

[18] Zinn, Op. Cit., p.57.

[19] *The German Ideology*, Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. D. Proletarians and Communism, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm).