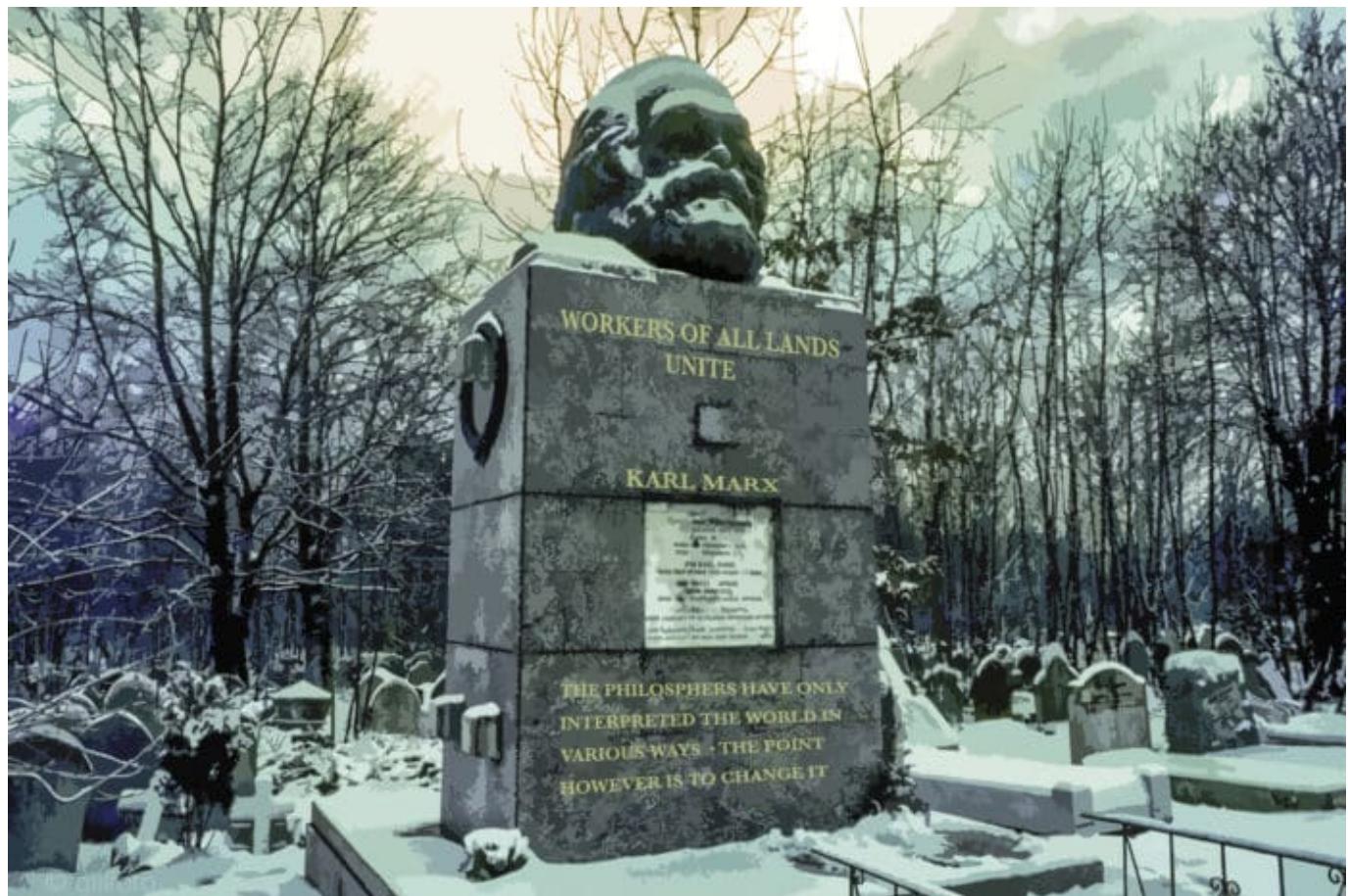


# Karl Marx's debt to people of African descent

written by Biko Agozino

February 5, 2024



*In this blogpost, Biko Agozino argues that Karl Marx was among the few European theorists of his time who did not try to conceal his ‘debt’ to Africa but celebrated such knowledge as foundational. Agozino shows how people of African descent were central to the theory, practice and writings of Marx. Marxism is not a Eurocentric ideology.*

Described by one editor as ‘nothing short of pathbreaking’, I am pleased to have been invited by roape.net to summarize in a blogpost the arguments in my paper [The Africana Paradigm in Capital: The Debts of Karl Marx to People of African Descent](#) (published in the journal in 2014 and free to access until the end of November). The original claim in the paper that Marx borrowed from the knowledge and experiences of people of African descent has also been described as ‘surprising’ by [Micco Sarno](#) who nevertheless concluded his detailed intertextual review by stating that the paper has deepened the understanding of [Capital](#) as a truly global critique of capitalism by a European author who was not Eurocentric. [Adam Mayer](#) wrote that the article ‘demolished the myth that Marxism was a Eurocentric ideology incompatible with African pride.’ In this summary of the paper, I highlight the key points and clarify some issues raised by some authors.

Contrary to claims by many that Marx was Eurocentric just like other European intellectuals of his time, my article argued that people of African descent were central to the discourse of Marx. I suggested that the earlier work of Marx, such as [The Manifesto of the Communist Party](#), may have misled some readers into assuming that his writings about class struggles dealt with only the European working class. This may be so because the history of slavery outlined in the *Manifesto* referred mostly to ancient slavery in Europe, but my article also shows that some of the references in the manifesto concerned modern slavery in the New World. I delved into his mature work, *Capital*, to reveal that it was centered on people of African descent as the paradigm for explaining the struggle for liberation

from oppression with emphasis on race-class-gender articulation contrary to crude economists, feminists, and Afrocentric scholars alike who assume that Marx was concerned only with male European working class struggles.

I concluded that article by suggesting that the epistemology and methodology of Marx as a scholar-activist who went beyond explaining the world and got involved in trying to change it for the better was a mirror image of the critical, creative, and centered paradigm that is privileged in Africana Studies and other critical disciplines today.[\[1\]](#) Therefore, the work of Marx should remain among the required readings for scholar-activists today instead of being subjected to rejectionist ideologies out of fear of marginalization by dominant powers or fear of the loss of originality if Marx is uncritically accepted as being relevant to all current struggles globally.

The rejectionist readings of Marx in relation to people of African descent can be illustrated in Cedric Robinson's influential text, [Black Marxism](#), which dismissed Marxism as 'a Western construction' with a philosophy, methodology, sociology and historical perspective that is 'decidedly Western'. People of African descent were challenged by Robinson to develop their own original theory and methods instead of relying on Marx. The charge of Eurocentrism against Marx can also be found in the work of Reiland Rabaka who lumped Marx together with Max Weber and *Émile Durkheim* in his work, [Against Epistemic Apartheid](#), where he held up the work of W.E. B Du Bois but did not add that Du Bois himself rightly found Marx to be an ally of the Africana struggle for social justice. In the work of Molefi Kete Asante, rejectionism appears to be a strategy for originality lest Eurocentric scholars claim that Afrocentricity has nothing new to offer in [An Afrocentric Manifesto](#). Some [feminist](#) writers have also rejected Marxism under the mistaken assumption that it neglected the oppression of women under the mode of reproduction.

While I support the call for more originality by scholars of African descent, I

demonstrated that some of the most original thinkers in the Africana tradition are decidedly Marxist without apology precisely because Marxism allows room for internal criticism in the concrete analysis of concrete situations, Marx borrowed from Africana traditions of intellectual and moral leadership, and the Marxist perspective has a track record of sticking up for struggles against racism-sexism-imperialism.

Since Africana scholars are not completely against citing the work of some European scholars with approval, the tendency among some of them to insist on rejecting the work of Marx is a curious case of the choice of allies especially when those who reject Marx rarely cite specific texts by him. There is absolutely no reason for the online journal, [Socialism and Democracy](#), to fantasize about a 'science fiction gun fight' between Marxists and Kawaida philosophers (a synthesis of nationalist, pan-Africanist, and socialist ideas) since [Kawaida](#) and Marxism are not mutually exclusive or at war with each other.

On the other hand, Eurocommunists may be responsible for the rejectionism from Africana scholars because they have tended to present Marxism as an exclusive heritage of European thought that should not be borrowed by people of African descent without obtaining permissions from the rightful owners. The Africa-born Eric Hobsbawm, in [How to Change the World](#), mistakenly asserted that the historical knowledge of Marx and Engels was 'nonexistent on Africa'. Far from it, there are hundreds of references to Africans and to people of African descent in *Capital*. I agree with the Africa-born [Jacques Derrida](#) that we all owe it to ourselves to return to an activist reading of [The Specters of Marx](#) instead of shying away from the task to avoid being seen as trespassing on the exclusive private intellectual property rights of [Marx and Sons](#) of Europe.

Stuart Hall built partly on the teachings on C.L.R James to offer an Africana interpretation of Marx in [Cultural Studies 1983](#). In his view, Eurocommunism made

the error of reading Marx simply from the perspective of what the Africa-born [Louis Althusser](#) called crude economic determinism that is not attributable to Marx who saw other struggles articulated with the economic class struggle. On the contrary, the work of Marx is also simultaneously against racism-sexism-imperialism as systems of oppressive power to be fought against through party building, alliances and coalitions.

Similarly, Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, and Angela Davis, among others, saw the struggle against apartheid not only as class struggles but also primarily as a struggle against racism-sexism-imperialism in articulation or intersectionality. To suggest that the class struggle was the only important struggle in apartheid South Africa as [Archie Mafaje](#) implied was 'mechanical' and strategically misleading as [Ruth First](#) stated in her response to Mafaje in a debate in ROAPE in 1978. Nathaniel Norment was right in listing Marxism as a major current in [African American Studies](#) and the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement is justified in organizing against racism-imperialism-patriarchy globally.

My article filled a gap in knowledge by going beyond what Marx could contribute to Africana Studies and focusing on what Marx borrowed from Africana Studies. Relying on the ease with which modern technology enables us to conduct a discourse analysis of soft copies of texts, I used the PDF versions of *Capital* and other works by Marx to see the frequency with which he referred to the struggles of people of African descent against slavery, racism, and imperialism and the struggle of women against sexism as part of his core concerns in opposition to racism-sexism-imperialism. The difficulty of reading his hefty tomes in hard copies may be responsible for the fact that this gap in knowledge existed for so long before the research I conducted for the 2014 study. However, my discourse analysis should not be mistaken for a quantitative analysis just because I noted the frequency or number of times that Marx referred to Africa and Africans.

The notion that Europeans borrowed from Africa should not be surprising because [Cheikh Anta Diop](#) already warned that Africans should not be too quick to reject European ideas because when you scratch their surface, you will find that some of the most profound European ideas were borrowed or stolen from Africa. Karl Marx was among the few European scholars of his time who did not try to conceal his 'borrowings' from Africa but celebrated such knowledge as foundational. Although his references to Africa in volume one of *Capital* are few, numbering about six, a discourse analysis rather than quantitative number crunching will show that the references to Africa are substantively higher because Marx indicated over and over again that the references to Africa were paradigmatic for understanding the capitalist system of production as a system of 'wage slavery'. The only error that Marx made was to use the term common in his time and since then by referring to the human trafficking of kidnapped Africans as a 'slave trade'. [Du Bois](#) also called it a 'trade' in his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University even though he proved that it was suppressed by law. The Marxist theory of primitive accumulation rightly identified it as robbery, plunder, and violence and as a consequence Marxists should support the demand for reparative justice.

On the 'Negro', the number of references increase to 14 in volume one of *Capital*, five times in volume three and six times in [Grundrisse](#), the methodological work in preparation for *Capital*. But these were not passing references or frequencies to be counted for quantitative analysis, they were foundational for Marxist theory. For example, Marx stated as follows:

*A negro is a negro. In certain circumstances he becomes a slave. A mule is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain circumstances does it become capital. Outside these circumstances, it is no more capital than gold is intrinsically money, or sugar is the price of sugar ... Capital is a social relation of production. It is a historical relation of production.* (Marx 1867, Vol. I, footnote 4, 541)

Here, Marx was giving a definitive role to people of African descent in the formation of the capitalist mode of production. The word slave was referenced 150 times in volume one and 72 times in volume three of *Capital*. In volume one, Marx critiqued Aristotle on the commodity fetishism of equal values because Aristotle failed to acknowledge that Greece was a slave society, what he was comparing were labors of equal value and not commodities. Africana Studies would not refer to people as slaves and Marxists would agree that they should be called enslaved people.

In his preface to the first English edition of volume one of *Capital*, Engels observed that after the abolition of slavery, the next struggle was to revolutionize the relationship between capital and land and he concluded (perhaps in acknowledgement of the Africana philosophy of nonviolence) that England held the promise of nonviolent revolution provided that the capitalists did not launch a pro-slavery rebellion. Although the references to slavery in volume three were to ancient slavery in Europe due to the influence of Engels who compiled the volume posthumously, Engels still added an appendix on the fascinating defeat of the British army by the Zulu who were armed with only sticks and stones. Marx had set up the [First International Workingmen's Association](#) precisely to oppose the British plans to join the American civil war on the side of the pro-slavery confederacy.

Numerous references to the concept of race can be found in *Capital* with a defiant usage that rejected white supremacy by consistently talking about the 'human race' and by questioning the concept of civilization when those who presumed themselves to be civilized were guilty of barbarous acts against indigenous people, women, and Africans. On the few instances when he used offensive words like the N-word or Kaffir, he was mocking the white supremacists who used such terms to signify white privilege. A collection of his work on [colonialism](#) also highlighted hundreds of references against racism, slavery, and colonialism. This short blogpost does not have the space to highlight and analyze each reference of relevance to people of African descent and to women but hopefully, a book will emerge from this project to detail

the evidence more comprehensively.

W.E.B. Du Bois used terms like the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to corroborate Marxist theory in [\*Black Reconstruction in America\*](#). C.L.R. James concurred in [\*The Black Jacobins\*](#) where he stated that the enslaved Africans on the sugar plantations represented the most industrialized workers of their time and he went on to write a series of essays on [\*The Negro Question\*](#) as foundational in Marxist theory and revolutionary practice. However, [\*George Padmore\*](#) concluded that Pan-Africanism was a better strategy for Africans than communism due to the exclusionary practices of Eurocommunism. Eric Williams completed the Africana trilogy on [\*Capitalism & Slavery\*](#) a few years after *The Black Jacobins* by James in his DPhil thesis at Oxford University.

[\*Claudia Jones\*](#) and later, [\*Angela Davis\*](#), also underscored the relevance of Marxism to the scholar-activism against racism-sexism-imperialism as articulated or intersectional systems of oppression to be opposed simultaneously. Fanon in [\*The Wretched of the Earth\*](#), Cabral in [\*Unity and Struggles\*](#), and Rodney in [\*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa\*](#), reached similar conclusions. There are still Marxist political parties and activists in Africa and they should be encouraged to unite to demonstrate the relevance of Marxism to Africana struggles against [\*imperialism-racism-sexism globally\*](#) worldwide and towards the social democratic building of the Peoples Republic of Africa or the United Republic of African States.

You do not need to be a Marxist to agree that the methodology of historical materialism is relevant to struggles on the ground in Africa and globally, not only to the European working-class. Since Africans continue to read the work of bourgeois European thinkers with approval despite their silence on Africa, there is no reason why we should continue to reject Marxism as foreign without attempting to read the powerful body of work that was partly based on Africana knowledge and struggles. European Marxists have no excuse to continue ignoring original work by scholar-

activists of African descent given that Marx would have paid close attention to such work.

—

The arguments in this blogpost are developed further by Biko Agozino in his ROAPE paper '[The Africana Paradigm in Capital: The Debts of Karl Marx to People of African Descent](#)'. Published in 2014, this ground-breaking article is available on free access until the end of November.

Biko Agozino is a Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at Virginia Tech and the author of [\*Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason\*](#) (London, Pluto, 2003) and of [\*Black Women and the Criminal Justice System: Towards the Decolonisation of Victimisation\*](#) (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997; reissued by Routledge, 2018).

## Notes

[1] A largely US based approach, Africana Studies is a multidisciplinary engagement to the research, experience and understanding of African people and African-descended people throughout the world.

Source: [ROAPE.net](#)

