

# The Federative Principle and the Necessity of Reconstituting the Party of the Revolution

1863

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## Third Part – The Unitary Press

### Chapter IX: Slavery and the Proletariat

What is happening on the other side of the Atlantic, three thousand leagues from the regions where the Mazzinian idea hovers, is clear proof of this truth that, outside of federalism, politics, regardless of the virtue and kindness of the heads of State, tends to degenerate into tyranny, plunder and extermination.

For half a century, the republic of the United States was regarded as the model for societies and the standard for governments. Indeed, an incomparable freedom unfolded there, surrounded by an unprecedented prosperity. But this republic, with its federalist forms, was infected with profound flaws. The fever of exploitation, imported from Europe with religion and laws, the pride of blood and wealth, had developed the principle of inequality and class distinctions to a frightening degree, and made the return to unitary government inevitable.

Three categories of subjects make up American society: *black workers*, slaves; *white workers*, increasingly driven into the proletariat; and the landed, capitalist, industrialist aristocracy. As slavery and the proletariat were incompatible with republican values, the southern states, although they call themselves DEMOCRATS par excellence, first conceived the idea of centralising the United States and dominating the Confederation. At the same time, they wished to develop over the entire surface of the republic their *particular institution*, namely black servitude. Rejected by those in the North, the vast majority, and who preferred to cover themselves with the title of REPUBLICANS; struck in their local interests by this majority, which intended to use the power in its turn and speak in the name of the entire Union, they broke the federal pact and constituted a slaveholder democracy, presumably unitary.

Two things would have been necessary, by common accord and energetic will, to save the Union: 1) free the blacks and give them citizenship, which the states in the North only half granted and which those of the South did not want at all; 2) energetically fight the growth of the proletariat, which did not enter the views of anyone. Threatened in the South and the North by black servitude and by the white proletariat, the Confederation was in peril: the obstinacy of both parties rendered the evil almost incurable. What if, in fact, things had been left alone, if the owning class of the North and the aristocracy of the South had remained united, only occupied with developing their respective exploitations, without doing anything for the waged or enslaved workers, and without worrying about the time when the two populations would meet, we could foresee the day when, the two floods colliding, the democratic multitude of the South would permeate the republican mass of the North, at the same time as the latter would overflow into the former. Then white workers and black workers mingling and soon understanding each other, the class of exploiters would have to change its confederation into a unitary State with a police force and gendarmes, a large standing army, centralised administration, etc., to protect itself from the slave and proletarian insurrection, if it did not wish to be subjected to seeing slaves and proletarians marching against it, it would have to name, like the examples of Haiti and Mexico, an emperor. If, on the contrary, the difference of the exploited races, if the divergence of the customs developed by the exploiters and the contradiction of their interests made separation inevitable, and which no force could prevent, the fortune of the North would be seriously compromised from the triple political, economic and strategic point of view, and we

could still foresee that the time would come when the republican majority would demand on its own terms an alliance with the slaveholding minority. In any event, the confederation was going to perish.

In this situation, the South took the initiative by proclaiming its independence: what has been the conduct of the North? Jealous to preserve its supremacy and considering that the territory of the United States comprised, according to it, a single nation, it began by treating the separatists as *rebels*; then, to remove any pretext for secession, it decided to transport, with compensation to the owners, all the slaves out of the republic, except those who requested permission to remain, but in an inferior condition, reminiscent of the Hindu pariahs. Thus, while they declare the confederates of the South *rebels* who, to save their particular exploitation, ask to leave a confederation that has become impossible, they decree by authority, they legalise, they render irrevocable the political and social separation of men by colour: a new way of applying the principle of nationality! Such is Lincoln's plan. If this plan comes to pass, it is clear that black servitude will only change its form; that a good number of blacks, indispensable for cultivation in hot regions, will be retained in the states where they live; that American society will not be more homogenous; that, furthermore, the desire to prevent any future attempt at separation by the southern States will have been a further step toward centralisation, so that, the geographic constitution here assisting the social constitution,<sup>1</sup> the federative republic of the United States will have only moved more quickly toward the unitary system by the Lincoln solution.

Now, the same Democracy which amongst us supports Italian unity also supports, under the pretext of the abolition of slavery, American unity; but, as though to better demonstrate that those two unities are in its eyes only two bourgeois, quasi-monarchical manifestations, having the purpose of consolidating human exploitation, it applauds the conversion of the slavery of the Blacks into the proletariat that Mr. Lincoln proposed. Compare that to the proscription which it has struck socialism since 1848, and you will have the secret of this democratic philanthropy, which does not support slavery, of course!... but accommodates itself wonderfully to the most brazen exploitation; you will have the secret of all these unities, the purpose of which is to break, by administrative centralisation, every force for resistance in the masses; you will have acquired the proof that what governs the politics of the so-called republicans and democrats in the United States, as well as in Italy and France is not justice, it is not the spirit of freedom and equality, it is not even an ideal, it is pure egotism, the most cynical of reasons of state.

If in its discussions on the American affair the democratic press had contributed as much judgment as zeal; if, instead of urging the North against the South and shouting *Kill! Kill!*, it had sought means of conciliation, it could have provided the warring parties wise counsel and noble examples. It would have told them:

“In a federal republic, the proletariat and slavery appear equally unacceptable; the tendency must be to abolish them.

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<sup>1</sup> If ever a confederation was placed in disadvantageous geographic conditions, it is surely that of the United States. We can say that fate is fundamentally hostile and that freedom has much to do. A vast continent, six hundred by one thousand leagues wide, squarish in shape, bathed on three sides by ocean, but whose coasts are so far apart that the sea can be said to be inaccessible to three-quarters of the inhabitants; in the middle of this continent, an immense corridor, or rather moat (Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio), which, if not neutralised or declared common property, will only form, for nineteen out of twenty residents, a route with no exit: here, in short, is the general configuration of the American Union. Thus the danger of secession was immediately understood, and it is undeniable that in this regard that the North fights for its existence as much as for Unity. Everything there at present is in contradiction: Whites and Blacks, the North and the South, the East and the West (Protestants and Mormons), the national character (Germanic and federalist) expressed by pact, and territory, interests and morals. At first glance, North America seems destined to form a great unitary Empire, comparable, even superior, to that of the Romans, the Mongols or the Chinese. But is it not also a marvellous thing that this continent has just fallen into the hands of the most federalist race due to its temperament, its genius and its aspirations, the Anglo-Saxon race? Let Mr. Lincoln teach his compatriots to overcome their revulsion; let him grant the blacks citizenship and at the same time declare war on [what creates] the proletariat, and the Union is saved.

“In 1848, the Swiss Confederation, after including in its new constitution the principle of equality before the law and abolishing all the old bourgeois and familial privileges, did not hesitate, by virtue of this new principle, to bestow citizenship and its rights on the *heimathlosen* (people without a country). – Can the American confederation, without forsaking its principle and without going backwards, refuse already emancipated men of colour who abound on its territory the same benefits that Switzerland granted to its *heimathlosen*? Instead of rejecting these men and afflicting them with indignities, must not all Anglo-Saxons, those of the North and those of the South, receive them in comradeship and welcome them as fellow citizens, equals and brothers? Now the consequence of that measure will be granting to blacks hitherto kept in servitude, along with freedmen, equal political rights.<sup>2</sup>

“In 1860, Tsar Alexander II of Russia, after freeing the peasants of his States, numbering more than twenty-five million souls, and bestowing upon them the enjoyment of such civil and political rights as the government of his empire provides, gave them all ownership of the land of which previously they were only serfs, reserving for himself the power to compensate the dispossessed nobles. – Will the American confederation do less for its emancipated blacks than Tsar Alexander, an autocrat, did for his peasants? Is it not prudent and just that it also bestows upon them land and ownership, so that they do not fall into a worse servitude than whence they came?

“The American confederation is called upon by the sequence of ideas which govern it and by the inevitability of its situation, to do even more: it must, upon pain of recrimination on the part of the Southern States, attack at its sources [what creates] the white proletariat, by providing possessions for the wage-workers [*possessionnant les salariés*] and organising, alongside political guarantees, a system of economic guarantees. It is up to the North to take the initiative on this reform, and lead the South by the force of example rather than by that of arms.

“Outside of that, the North’s hypocritical and unholy attack against the South can only lead to the ruin of all the States and the destruction of the Republic.”

At least Mr. Lincoln, obliged to take into account the aristocratic spirit and moral revulsions of the Anglo-Saxon race, is excusable to a certain extent, and the sincerity of his intentions must pardon his strange philanthropy. But the French, men trained in the school of Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Revolution, in whom the egalitarian sentiment must be innate, how did they not sense that the demand of the North entailed all these consequences? How can they be content with Mr. Lincoln’s semblance of emancipation? How do they have the courage to applaud the recent appeal for slaves to revolt, an appeal which is obviously made by a North desperate for a means of destruction, and which repudiates both the laws of war and the rights of peoples?... Where is the excuse of these so-called liberals? Do they not see that the feeling that drives them is not love of humanity, but the cold calculation of a hypocrite economist, who says to himself after comparing its costs: Certainly, it is more advantageous for the capitalist, for the head of industry, for property and the State whose interests here are united, to use *free* workers, who support themselves with their wages, than enslaved workers who give more trouble than wage-workers and produce proportionally less profit regardless of [the costs of] their subsistence?

These facts, these analogies and these considerations posed, here are the questions that I address to Fr. Morin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This echoes Proudhon’s comments in *General Idea of the Revolution* (1851): “There will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland, in the political sense of the words: they will mean only places of birth. Whatever a man’s race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen’s rights everywhere.” (*Property is Theft!*, 597). (Translator)

<sup>3</sup> Frédéric Morin (1823-74) was a French republican and journalist who opposed the coup d’état of Louis-Napoleon and stood as an opposition candidate in 1857 and 1863. (Translator)

The federative principle here appears closely linked to those of the social equality of races and the balance of fortunes. The political problem, the economic problem and the problem of races are one and the same problem, to be solved by the same theory and the same jurisprudence.

Notice, with regard to *black workers*, that physiologists and ethnographers recognise them as being of the same species as whites; – that religion declares them, along with whites, children of God and of the Church, redeemed by the blood of the same Christ and consequently their spiritual brethren; – that psychology sees no difference between the constitution of the negro conscience and that of the white, no more than between the comprehension of one and the other; – finally, [and] this is proven by daily experience, that with education and, if needed, interbreeding, that the black race can yield offspring as remarkable in talent, morality and industry as the white one can and that more than once already it has been an invaluable help in reinforcing and rejuvenating it.

I therefore ask M. Fr. Morin:

If the Americans, after forcibly removing the blacks from their African countries to enslave them on American soil, have the right today to expel those that they no longer want;

If this *deportation*, which only renews in an inverse direction the odious fact of the first removal, does not constitute, amongst the so-called abolitionists, a crime equal to that of the slavers;

If, by a century of servitude, the Negroes have not acquired the right of use and of habitation on American soil;

If it is sufficient for the French proprietors to say to their proletarian compatriots, to all those who possess neither capital nor resources and who exist by the hiring of their arms, “The soil is ours; you do not own an inch of land, and we no longer need your services: go”; – for the proletarians to skedaddle;

If the Black, as free as the White by nature and by his human dignity, can, by recovering the possession of their momentarily lost person, be excluded from citizenship;

If this right is not acquired by the double fact of his recent emancipation and his prior residence;

If the condition of pariah, to which the Lincoln plan dooms the Black, would be no worse for this minority race than slavery;

If that derisory emancipation is not shameful for the North and does not morally defeat the claim of the South;

If *Federals* and *Confederates*, fighting only over the type of servitude, must not be declared equally blasphemers and renegades of the federative principle, and shunned by [other] nations;

If the European press, which by its incitements, by its unitarism and its anti-egalitarian tendencies, has become their accomplice in all this, does itself not deserve the stigma of public opinion?

And generalising my thought, I ask M. Fr. Morin:

If he believes that the inequality of faculties between people is such that it can legitimise inequality of prerogatives;

If inequality of fortunes, for which the inequality of faculties serves as a pretext and which creates in society such dreadful antagonisms, is not far more the work of privilege, cunning and chance, than that of Nature;

If the first duty of States is not therefore to repair, by institutions of mutuality and a vast system of education, the insults of birth and the accidents of social life;

If it does not seem to him, therefore, that the principle of equality before the law must have as a corollary, 1) the principle of equality of races, 2) the principle of equality of conditions, 3) that of ever more approached, although never achieved, equality of fortunes;

If, according to what is happening before our eyes, it appears to him that those principles, the negation of every political, economic and social privilege, of every meaning of people and races, of every

preference of fate, of every class superiority, can be seriously applied and pursued under a government other than a federative government;

If, finally, as far as logic, history and contemporary facts allow us to judge, is there no true incompatibility between Right and the destiny of mankind and the practices and aspirations of the unitary system?

As for me, immorality and servitude are what I have discovered at the bottom of this policy of unity, which is that of Mazzini and the Jacobins; which tomorrow will be that of President Lincoln, if a better inspiration does not come to extract him and his compatriots from their fatal and ruthless prejudices.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that, as Proudhon feared, the failure after the war to provide a solid economic footing for the freed slaves – most became wage-workers – is now considered a cause of the failure of Reconstruction. W. E. B. DuBois captured that failure well in 1935 when he wrote: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery”. (*Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* [New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013], 26) Incidentally, this perspective was shared by many Negroes at the time who “understood that their status after the war, whatever their situation legally, would depend on whether they owned the land they worked on or would be forced to be semislaves for others.” Nor should it be ignored as the Southern states “enacted ‘black codes’ which made the freed slaves like serfs” after the end of the Civil War. (Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* [New York: HarperCollins Books, 2003], 196, 199). See, Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday Books, 2008). (Translator)