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FRIEDRICH ENGELS (1820–95)

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Friedrich Engels's reputation has often not fared well. Regarded as the lesser intellect in relation to Marx, he is sometimes dismissed as the one who distorted Marx's thought and derailed the socialist tradition. Not only did he make a mess of his editing work with the second and third volumes of *Capital*, but he also distorted the later tradition by means of his *Dialectics of Nature* (1873–82) and his very popular *Anti-Dühring* (1877–78). With such distortion, so the criticism goes, it is no surprise that those dependent on Engels – even if they believed he represented a true and clear exposition of Marx's thought – betrayed the spirit of Marx's own thought. This assumption can be found among the many different strands of Marxism, from Europe, through North America to Australia (Berlin 1963, 103–4; Levine 1975, 2006; Carver 1983, 1990, 259–60; Hunt 1985; Howard and King 1989, 6–7; Arthur 1996; Steger and Carver 1999; Heinrich 1996; Roth 2002, 65; Musto 2009, 265–66),¹ although this is far less so in China (Zang 2015).

In what follows, I seek to redress this perception somewhat, focusing on three topics: relations between the military and social formations; Engels's early works on political economy; and his arguments concerning the revolutionary role of religion. Before doing so, let me address the issue of collaboration. I take the position that Marx and Engels worked together in such a way that it is often difficult to separate their ideas. After their first serious meeting in 1844, they came to correspond regularly when they were not physically together. This correspondence became even more frequent after Engels settled in Manchester and the Marxes in London. When Engels was finally able to divest himself of responsibilities at the family firm in Manchester and settle in London in 1870, Marx and Engels would meet almost daily in the afternoons. Their endless discussions took place while pacing Marx's study. Engels smoked his pipe and Marx his cigars, as they drank coffee or – more often – glasses of beer. They would start in different corners and then stride toward the middle, where they crossed and ended in their respective corners, only to repeat the process countless times. In this context, nearly all of their ideas were shared. If one or the other had come up with an idea, he would test it on the other for comment, and then the discussion would delve deeper. Although it is frequently difficult to discern distinct contributions, even in work attributed to one or the other, I focus on three insights that can with reasonable certainty be attributed primarily to Engels.

Military Insights

As an energetic and indeed athletic young man, in 1842 Engels grasped an opportunity and enlisted in the 12th Foot Company of the Guards Artillery Brigade in Berlin. He used the time to full advantage, attending lectures by Schelling and others, participating in the late-night debates at the Hippel Café (where he first encountered Marx), and gaining much from the discipline of military training. This discipline would stand him in good stead. For example, he took to the field during the failed revolutions of 1848. At first, he volunteered to join the rebel armies in Elberfeld and Barmen (his home) and a little later led and attempted to train a militia in the Palatinate and Baden. The experience of being under fire, as well as seeing how terribly untrained were the forces with which he worked, taught him much about himself, the importance of a good military force for any revolutionary movement, and the need for decisive action at the opportune moment.

Not long afterwards, Engels turned his experience into correspondence for a number of English newspapers. He covered military operations during the European revolutions of 1848–49 (focusing on the Hungarian Revolution), the Crimean War, the Franco-German War, the Indian uprising against the British and so on.² He developed a keen eye for strategic developments, identifying before others the direction of a war. Engels had found a distinct niche, turning his attention to more systematic analyses of military training, equipment, discipline, tactics and even uniforms.³

Through all of this attention to military matters, Engels developed a telling insight into the nature of revolutionary armies (which has been neglected in the intellectualization of Marxism of late). He argued that a communist revolutionary movement or party should always pay attention to the condition, training and discipline of their armed forces. Indeed, a communist revolution would never succeed without an able armed force, which included winning over significant sectors of a state's army to the revolutionary cause. Further, a revolutionary intervention requires not merely a unified and disciplined party, but also a crack armed force ready to act decisively and boldly. More importantly, he identified a crucial social dimension: the nature of the military indicates very well the nature of class and social formation in a society at large. So, he argued that a militia drawn from the whole population is appropriate to a communist society and that guerrilla warfare is a significant factor in a revolutionary movement (Engels 1986). These studies constitute a body of unique work that became extraordinarily relevant in the Russian Revolution (Lenin 1962, 1963; Stalin 1954). When the Battleship *Potemkin* mutinied in favor of the communists after the 1905 revolution, the latter delved into Engels's works. It soon dawned on the Bolsheviks that armed force was crucial to the revolution. They began to form the Red Guards, made up of workers trained in the tactics of guerrilla warfare. It should be no surprise that Engels's nickname became "The General."

Political Economy

The second major contribution concerns political economy. Since this work has been analyzed by others, I draw on some aspects of these studies, especially in the way Engels's first period in England (1842–44) led to his incisive pieces on political economy. This work led to what Stathis Kouvelakis calls the empirical and theoretical "discovery of the proletariat" (2003, 167–231).⁴

As Kouvelakis points out, Engels's insight was to translate the notable paradox of English backwardness (in terms of politics, society and intellectual life) and forwardness (in economics) into a German philosophical framework.⁵ The key becomes contradiction, understood in terms of the dialectic and materialized in a spate of oppositions: division of labor, class, competition,

wage-labor and capital, pauperization and concentration of wealth, the social and the economic, objective and subjective, and then the necessary process of intensification and the simplification of the dialectic in terms of revolution.

A key text is “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” in which Engels criticizes the moral framework of Adam Smith’s benign view of the “market.” Engels argues that capitalism does not arise gradually, until it attains its true form and thereby generates national wealth, but rather that capitalism is constituted by a fundamentally antagonistic relation that grows ever stronger. For Engels, the English economists simply miss the antagonistic nature of all that they touch. “Division of labor” is not a wonderful development, as they argued, but the basis of class and class conflict between wage-labor and capital. “Competition” does not lead to the desirable outcome of lower prices, but to struggle and crime. “Free trade” means new forms of monopoly, despotism, violence and degradation. “Private property” means the appropriation of wealth and the pauperization of those who miss out. “National wealth” is anything but national, for it is held increasingly in the hands of the relatively few capitalists, while the mass of workers is excluded: “The ‘national wealth’ of the English is very great, and yet they are the poorest people under the sun” (*MECW* 3: 421).

Engels goes much further on a number of points. The chronic instability and crisis-ridden nature of the capitalist market emerges in his writings, along with the role of the reserve army of the unemployed in the spiral of crises, the falling rate of wages and thereby standards of living, an articulation of the concentrations of capital, and an awareness of the influences of technological change in response to this self-destabilizing nature of capitalist economics. Further, the “market” in question is not an entity unto itself, ideally operating in terms of *laissez faire*, but is rather socially determined so that the revolution to come will be a social revolution. Even more, the materialist realities of social dualism cannot be understood without the ideological features of consciousness that are manifested in classes. The ideological and the social may be based on the material, but they are then transformed into instruments that will realize their own material aims. The dialectic, of course, has its own dynamic, in which antagonisms must be exacerbated and then simplified into two great warring camps through a spiral of crises, before the resolution of the antagonisms. In Engels’s argument the first implicit articulation of objective and subjective factors in revolution emerges. As the tensions grow and the socio-economic conditions ripen, the working class becomes unavoidably conscious of its mission and engages in confrontation and then revolution. Crucially, these insights were developed first by Engels, with Marx taking up his insights and developing them further.

Apart from the inherent contradictions of capitalism, Engels also identified the working class as a practical and theoretical category. But what does he mean by the working class? Here *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (1845) is crucial, not so much for its first-hand detail of the barbaric conditions of the Manchester working class districts (revealed to Engels under the guidance of Mary Burns), but for its theoretical breakthrough. The key is twofold: to understand the proletariat in terms of its enemy and to see it transformed into a movement. On the first point, the proletariat comes into being through this opposition, which is generated not only by the objective economic conditions of capitalism, but also by the sense of who the bourgeoisie is and why the bourgeoisie is an implacable opponent and oppressor. The bourgeoisie, *Mittelklasse* or middle-class, is implacably opposed by the working class, like two opposed camps or armies that must come to open battle – the military metaphors should not be unexpected.

Second, the working class moves from being an empirical reality to a workers’ movement (*MECW* 4: 500). This entails subjective resistance to intolerable conditions: “The workers, the great majority of the nation, will not endure it” (*MECW* 4: 507). This rebellion against the class enemy may initially take the crude form of individual “crime” against the oppressors, but soon

enough it is transformed into “association.” It appears in myriad forms: initially “secret” and then the hard-won right to “free association”; in educational activities; in unions and strikes; in the persistent resistance that keeps “alive the opposition of the workers to the social and political omnipotence of the bourgeoisie” (*MECW* 4: 507). The perpetual drive of these associations is to challenge and ultimately destroy competition, which makes the everyday lives of workers a misery. Here the specific and immediate campaigns of workers’ associations – higher wages, less hours, better conditions – are also part and parcel of the future communist society:

If the competition among the workers is destroyed, if all determine not to be further exploited by the bourgeoisie, the rule of property is at an end. . . . The moment workers resolve not to be bought and sold no longer, when . . . they take the part of men possessed of a will as well as of working-power, at that moment the whole Political Economy of today is at an end.

(*MECW* 4: 507)

This pattern of political association is endemic to the nature of the working class, so much so that it cannot help organizing itself as a class, becoming unified and drawing together all the different currents of organized resistance.

In closing these observations concerning Engels’s early insights, we face a paradox. Engels predicted with absolute confidence that the revolution would first happen – and soon – in England, due to the exacerbation of the contradictions in capitalism and the growth of the working-class movements. He was spectacularly wrong, as the repressive measures after the 1842 Chartist uprising came into effect and elements of the working class were bourgeoisified. Indeed, the working-class movements had already begun a process of decline at the time he did his research, so much so that they hardly made an impression during the revolutionary period of 1848 and would take a long time indeed to recover. Yet the paradox is that it was precisely this situation that provided Engels with his crucial insights into economics and the nature of the proletariat, insights that would have ramifications later and in – for both him and Marx – unexpected revolutions.

We can go further with this argument (which I have initially drawn from Kouvelakis). The dialectical nature of Engels’s argument led eventually to another conclusion, first broached by Lenin’s “weakest link” (1964). Instead of an advanced economic situation, it would turn out to be the specific “backwardness” of Russia’s (and then China’s, if not Asia’s more generally) economic situation that would produce the conditions for revolutionary intervention. In this context, the “non-contemporaneity” (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) of the present creates the possibility for socialist revolution, in which the unattained hopes of earlier forms link with present anticipations. In dialectical parlance, the revolutionary impulse of the present, which emerges from class struggle and generates expectations of a “prevented future” and the unleashing of the forces of production, gains “*additional revolutionary force* precisely from the *incomplete* wealth of the past” (Bloch 1991, 115–16). This philosophical elaboration by Ernst Bloch provides a significant argument, with its call for a multi-temporal and multi-spatial dialectic, that not merely makes sense of the successful socialist revolutions in supposedly “backward” countries rather than “advanced” capitalist ones, but rather reveals the necessity of socialist revolution in precisely in such places.

Back to Engels: it is not for nothing that his early work, especially his “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” was acknowledged by Marx as a “brilliant essay on the critique of economic categories.” However, it is worth noting that Marx fully acknowledges that Engels “arrived by another road” to the same conclusions (*MECW* 29: 264). What Marx fails to say here is that Engels did so before him in an original way, not least because of Engels’s direct experience in the family enterprise and his long residence and research in England. Yet, the

contribution of Engels did not stop with his early work, for his close involvement with *Capital* ensured that Marx had access to practical and theoretical insights drawn from Engel's involvements in Manchester. Indeed, it can be argued that the second and third volumes of *Capital* benefitted from Engels hard work in editing them (Hollander 2011, 285–92).

Revolutionary Religion

Engels's third original contribution concerns the potential for a religion like Christianity to become revolutionary. This argument developed over a lifetime, being first glimpsed as a devout young man and finally explained only a few months before his death. Let me begin with a summary of the complete argument:

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar's will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow . . . was known by the name of Christians.
(MECW 27: 523)

The proposal has both theoretical and theoretical dimensions, which emerged over time and intersect with one another. Let me set the context: as a young man of Reformed (Protestant) persuasion, he attended church, reflected on the preaching, read the Bible carefully (the New Testament in Greek) and debated with his friends and pastors, the Graeber brothers. However, the deepening influence of new philosophical currents biblical criticism led him to a profound struggle, in which he was unable to reconcile a conservative theological outlook with the challenges thrown up by the newer criticism. Painfully he gave up his faith, although in the process he wrote some insightful pieces that formed the basis of his later reflections on religion.

In particular, he noticed both the hypocrisy between piety and economic exploitation in his home town of Elberfeld-Barmen and the potential for political ambivalence. Here the theoretical insight already begins to emerge, although it is often implicit rather than explicit. Thus, the question of political ambivalence first appears in Engels's early observations on the famous Reformed preacher, Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacker, at whose feet Engels sat. On one occasion, Engels notes that the latter

speaks of the contradiction between earthly riches and the humility of Christ, or between the arrogance of earthly rulers and the pride of God. A note of his former demagogy very often breaks through here as well, and if he did not speak in such general terms the government would not pass over his sermons in silence.
(MECW 2: 15)

What was this former demagogy? "As a student he was involved in the demagogy of the gymnastic associations, composed freedom songs, carried a banner at the Wartburg festival, and delivered a speech which is said to have made a great impression" (MECW 2: 15). The point is implicitly dialectical: through a radical transcendence revolutionary options may emerge.

This theoretical insight would reemerge from time to time in Engels's writings. On the one hand, he inveighs against the conservative, if extremely reactionary expressions of religion. They

are nothing less than springs of endless deception, mystification and misery, so that the struggle for communism must overcome the resistance of religion: “We too attack the hypocrisy of the present Christian state of the world; the struggle against it, our liberation from it and the liberation of the world from it are ultimately our sole occupation” (*MECW* 3: 462). On the other hand, he also begins to cite religiously inspired revolutionary figures such as Thomas Müntzer et al. (Engels 1975d). Indeed, the full study of Müntzer would become the first historical materialist analysis of a religious revolutionary moment, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850). In this study – and now we move to the historical dimension of Engels’s contribution – he may have argued that theological language was a cloak for the political core, but he also observes that Luther’s own teaching provided the radical impulse for Müntzer (only for Luther to backtrack and condemn the outcome of his teaching). Engels continued to develop his historical arguments, focusing now on early Christianity and the work of Bruno Bauer. In the early 1880s, he penned a couple of preparatory pieces (Engels 1989b, 1990a) on Bauer’s approach and the biblical book of Revelation, before finally laying out his full historical argument.

This appeared in “On the Early History of Christianity” (1894–95), where he proposed that Christian origins were revolutionary for three main reasons. First, its followers came from exploited and poor peasants, slaves and unemployed urban poor. Second, this movement was in form very similar to the communist movement, with its false prophets, sects, conflicts and financial problems. Third, from its marginal origins it conquered the Roman Empire. The final point is a little problematic, for Christianity easily became a religion of empire – a point that actually indicates the political ambivalence of Christianity. Engels also observes that Christianity tended to offer other-worldly solutions to earthly problems, but the structure of his argument indicates a very this-worldly focus: the New Jerusalem would be as much of this world as the next.

Apart from the influence of this argument on biblical scholars and subsequent Marxists, I note here Marx’s awareness of this position. In a report from 1882, the following appears:

The persecutions of the governments against the International were like the persecutions of ancient Rome against the primitive Christians. . . . The persecutions of Rome had not saved the empire, and the persecutions of the present day against the International would not save the existing state of things.

(*MECW* 22: 633; see also *MECW* 46: 67)

Conclusion

I have focused on three distinct contributions by Engels: his insightful work on military matters; his initial discoveries and continuing contributions to key points of Marx’s economic analysis; and his argument for the revolutionary possibilities of religion. Yet so often Engels put himself at the service of Marx’s projects, fostering, encouraging, cajoling and castigating the undisciplined Marx to get his work done. This self-created image has left its mark on subsequent impressions. But it was Engels who provided the primary guiding hand and theoretical impulse to the next generation of socialists. He saw with immense pleasure the massive growth of the German Social-Democratic Party, along with socialist movements throughout Europe, Russia and the rest of the globe. Nearly every socialist was introduced to Marxism by two of Engels’s later texts: *Anti-Dühring* and the extract published as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. One may quibble with some of his formulations, but they were the main works read, studied and cited, since Engels was able to write clearly and succinctly. Above all, they provided the path to the denseness of Marx’s texts.

Notes

1. Hollander (2011, 1–2), describes the different ways of denigrating Engels in relation to Marx in terms of: operator versus the thinker; vulgar mechanist versus the humanist Hegelian; revisionist versus the brilliant originator; “His Master’s Voice” versus the Master. See also Kircz and Löwy (1998) and Hunt (2010, 5).
2. The articles begin in *MECW* 11 and continue for many years afterwards.
3. A significant number appears in *MECW* 18.
4. The following draws in part on Kouvelakis (2003), as well as Hollander (2011), who has argued for the crucial role of Engels in the development of Marx’s thought. Engels drew upon his direct experience in the Manchester firm, but also continually challenged Marx to make his theoretical arguments stronger.
5. The contradiction is enhanced when we recall that Germany’s backwardness in political and economic forms had already begun producing a distinct forwardness in philosophy (as well as critical inquiry into ancient texts like the Bible).

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