

Friedrich Engels, a Thinker for Today

Two hundred years since his birth, Friedrich Engels is often considered a man rooted in the culture of 19th-century thought. But if not all his predictions ring true, his critique of the rising industrial capitalism offers penetrating insights into our own present.



Friedrich Engels was born on November 28, 1820.

Friedrich Engels was many things: a soldier, a journalist, a historian, an economist, a capitalist, and a communist revolutionary. Many stories could be told about his life, from his taste for fox hunting with England's ruling elite to his affairs with Irish proletarian women.

Whoever is interested in the all-too-human aspect of this "[frock-coated communist](#)" will find a rich body of literature. But rather less examined is whether Engels's particular critique of capitalism still holds. Two hundred years from his birth, what can the Left actually learn from Engels's writings?

Even [to pose the question](#) is to break ranks with the main ways in which Engels's legacy has been treated. In the countries of Soviet-style "actually existing socialism," he was treated as a spiritual founding father of the nation — indeed, co-inventor of a state ideology of "historical materialism." In the West, conversely, he was always suspected of complicity in the crimes committed in his name, from the gulag to the Berlin Wall. Today's liberal thinkers usually adopt something of a middle position, honoring his "concern for social inequality" while remaining dubious about his commitment to the "dictatorship of the proletariat."

But correct insights should be adopted even if they can also be found in a Soviet textbook. And what is incorrect should be discarded, even if that might be considered an offense against Marxist orthodoxy. Here, we make no claim to treat Engels's ideas in a comprehensive fashion. What we can do is pick out some key insights in his work that can help inform our understanding, and our struggles, today.

Against Malthus, for Humanity

In 1844, at just twenty-three years of age, Engels published his essay on the *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*. Engels had already identified political economy as a central field of theoretical struggle, even before Karl Marx took up any extensive studies in this field. This essay already contained a lot of ideas that would find their way into Marx's *Das Kapital* later on.

“For Engels, immeasurable productive powers could possibly sustain a population four or five times the size. However, under capitalism, this possibility is squandered.” This text was especially notable for its criticisms of bourgeois economists, including Thomas Robert Malthus. This latter, an influential cleric, had argued that “overpopulation” — an objective excess of people on the planet — was the cause of all kinds of economic and environmental upheaval.

While the name Malthus is hardly much used in political debate today, the idea of “overpopulation” is very much alive. From the Club of Rome to the UN's International Conference on Population and Development, excess population, especially in the “Third World,” is often considered the reason for world hunger and poverty.

Engels took a quite opposite approach. As he put it,

The productive power at mankind's disposal is immeasurable. The productivity of the soil can be increased ad infinitum by the application of capital, labor and science. According to the most able economists and statisticians . . . “over-populated” Great Britain can be brought within ten years to produce a corn yield sufficient for a population six times its present size.

For Engels, immeasurable productive powers could possibly sustain a population four or five times the size. However, under capitalism, this possibility is squandered: one part of the land is cultivated in the best possible manner whilst another part . . . lies barren. One part of capital circulates with colossal speed; another lies dead in the chest. One part of the workers works fourteen or sixteen hours a day, whilst another part stands idle and inactive, and starves.

From his earliest writings, we learn that the world is only ever overpopulated from the perspective of capital. This especially holds true in our own time, when all social reproduction, from food to housing to childcare, is subordinated to the higher needs of accumulating capital — and a growing mass of people is left aside, considered “dispensable” from capitalism's standpoint. The notion of overpopulation only makes sense in terms of this capitalist rationality: its claim that there is “not enough to go around” is a lie. The consequence is that we have to fight not against “an overpopulated world,” but against an economy that makes human beings into mere “excess” population.

The Condition of the Working Class in England

Engels's 1845 study on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is considered a classic today, and not only by leftists. Those working on empirical social studies view this text as a kind of forerunner for their own efforts. In fact, the piece is better than this would imply: it not only *describes* the working class's miserable conditions, but *explains* why things are like this.

At surface level, this work does share a lot of similarities with sociological research. As Engels remarks [in the preface](#), he first had to rectify the ignorance among many supposed social reformers:

the real conditions of the life of the proletariat are so little known among us that even the well-meaning "societies for the uplift of the working-classes", in which our bourgeoisie is now mistreating the social question, constantly start out from the most ridiculous and preposterous judgments concerning the condition of the workers.

To this end, he provided a well-illustrated account of proletarian hardships in capitalism's "Manchester era." This aspect of the study is the most well-regarded one today, probably because it is imagined there actually *isn't* much to be learned from miseries of the past — that things have changed. Because the hardships of industrialization are long over, schoolchildren nowadays are taught to be appalled by the conditions of "Manchester capitalism," because they justify present conditions. Such is the logic of historical comparison: "At least it isn't 1845 anymore."

But Engels did not just *describe* woeful conditions — he also wanted to *explain* why capitalism produces them. Hence he drew a comparison of his own. And it was hardly a reassuring one:

The slave is assured of a bare livelihood by the self-interest of his master, the serf has at least a scrap of land on which to live; each has at worst a guarantee for life itself. But the proletariat must depend upon himself alone, and is yet prevented from so applying his abilities as to be able to rely upon them. . . . To save is unavailing, for at the utmost he cannot save more than suffices to sustain life for a short time, while if he falls out of work, it is for no brief period. To accumulate lasting property for himself is impossible; and if it were not, he would only cease to be a working-man and another would take his place.

"Engels anticipated the central argument in the Marxist critique of capitalism: that wage labor is no means to make a living, even if most of humanity is forced to treat it as such."

Engels thus already formulated an idea that was to become central to Marx's *Das Kapital* more than twenty years later: the exploitation the modern wage worker faces is a product of — and is not in contradiction to — his freedom. His freedom from any master, but also lack of ties to any means to "apply his abilities," is what compels him to enter the field of capitalist competition, selling his labor. But in this competition, he quickly learns that labor is not really his means, but the means of capitalists: he can earn a wage only if his work is profitable for the employers, and he immediately loses employment once his work ceases to be profitable. Whatever becomes of his ability to work is completely out of his control.

Hence in his early study of English working-class life, Engels anticipated the central argument in the Marxist critique of capitalism: that wage labor is no means to make a living, even if most of humanity is forced to treat it as such.

Historical Mission

Sadly, insights like these weren't what most contributed to Engels's fame within the burgeoning workers' movement. Rather, he was cited as the first to recognize the "historical mission of the proletariat" (as German communist Clara Zetkin put it). Engels was honored as "the first Marxist" — and his scientific socialism was reduced to the idea that socialism was a historical inevitability.

In this view, not only should the proletariat abolish wage labor because it is a terrible way of making a living — but in so doing it would *fulfill the laws of historical development*. If the proletariat acted in accordance with the laws of history then it would "avoid any aberration" on its "certain path to victory" "nothing [could] stop it on its way toward victory" (as Wilhelm Liebknecht remarked in his eulogy to Engels, upon his death in 1895).

Such talk rings hopelessly optimistic today. But it can't be denied that there are many passages within Engels's work that can be read in terms of a teleology of history, following a necessary series of stages. For example, in his later pamphlet [*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*](#) Engels argues that a capitalist "crisis demonstrates the incapacity of the bourgeoisie for managing any longer modern productive forces" such as it had itself summoned up.

This is ironic, because a capitalist crisis shows the exact opposite — that the bourgeoisie is only interested in the productive forces as a means for accumulating capital for itself and will gladly shut down factories and lay off workers if they don't serve this purpose anymore. If anything, this proves the capitalists' ability to subordinate the whole reproduction of society to their own ends. Through the crisis, the capitalist class puts the productive forces back on track by reducing the cost of labor through layoffs, wage reduction, and the intensification of labor.

The idea that capitalists' "incapacity" to manage the modern forces of production will ultimately produce the death of capitalism is a product of Engels's imagination. The capitalist class cannot fail to fulfill a purpose that it never had, of "managing" the productive forces. Nor will it fail in the purpose it really has set itself, of using these productive forces to advance its own enrichment. Unless, that is, working people no longer put up with this.

With each crisis, the idea that the capitalist class is unable to cope with modern capitalism resurfaces — and it's not limited to the Left. The financial crisis of 2008 was widely attributed to greedy bankers that had screwed up their job. But this hasn't brought us any nearer to the end of capitalism. That will take nothing less than a class-conscious workers' movement. Luckily, the tools that help us to build such a movement are also to be found in the works of Friedrich Engels.