

## Friedrich Engels's Revolutionary Republicanism

**In the years after Karl Marx's death, Friedrich Engels wrote that a rising socialist movement could now advance by means other than violent insurrection. This didn't mean an embrace of existing institutions — rather, it meant recovering the mass democracy experimented with during the French Revolution.**



The very last text Friedrich Engels prepared was the introduction to Karl Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*. (Wikimedia Commons)

Two hundred years since his birth, Friedrich Engels's name remains inextricably linked to that of his friend Karl Marx. On many points, the two authors of *The Communist Manifesto* were in total agreement, but it's also true that each man had his own particular sensibilities. For instance, Marx's philosophical works were richer and more substantial than Engels's, and we can equally say that Engels's political activity involved elements and experiences that Marx's did not. And there was good reason for this: Engels died twelve years after Marx.

This is important — for the period between Marx's death in 1883 and Engels's own in 1895 were also years in which the workers' movement enjoyed considerable growth across Europe. This period, therefore, posed several questions which Marx could only briefly glimpse. Was revolution still on the agenda? Would the development of the working-class's organizations allow them to take power in the short term? And if so, how? In his final years, Engels tried to offer a series of responses to these burning questions.

But let's start from the end of the story: the very last text Engels prepared, an

introduction to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*. Written in 1895, for decades this piece would be taken for Engels's "political testament"; it sparked many debates, especially in Germany. This especially owed to the fact that the version first published by German Social Democratic leaders was falsified, in order to give it more "moderate" trappings.

This has allowed some to see this text as an anticipation of political reformism: Engels, it would seem, abandoned a simple definition of the state as a "class state" — a mere instrument of the bourgeoisie — and came to see it as one of the battlefields contested by the different classes. Major contributions by the exponents of so-called Western Marxism have emphasized this consideration, often by contrasting this "late Engels" to a more revolutionary Marx.

For many commentators, Engels is thus the de facto originator of reformist social democracy. Yet others insist on a different interpretation of this text — not least given that it was published only long after his death. Engels himself had no intention of making this text into his "testament" and had many parallel projects in the works before he died. Indeed, this introduction was closely connected to the conjunctural developments of West European politics — especially the strengthening of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had recently become able to operate within a legal framework — and not a timeless "testament" to his thinking.

But what *can* we learn from Engels's final text? It clearly did mark a turning point: here, Engels said that it was no longer possible to advocate revolution and an insurrectionary approach in all circumstances. Political developments in his homeland — and in particular, the mounting strength of the SPD — evidently played some role in this evolution in Engels's thinking. But to properly understand this, we especially have to reckon with his assessment of French politics. Acknowledging the successes of the Third Republic (founded in 1870, stabilized after 1879), Engels also recognized the demands placed on the socialist movement within a new political context.

## Engels in France

The final years of Friedrich Engels's life were also the period in which France's socialist movement took on mass proportions. Already since the 1830s, there had been socialists and various expressions of the socialist idea in France. But with the creation of the first Workers' Party (in two stages, in 1879 and 1882), socialism made decisive steps as a political force.

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Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue was elected an MP for Lille in a by-election in 1891, and in the 1893 general election socialist MPs became a force in the National Assembly. Jean Jaurès, up till then a rather moderate republican, was now elected on a socialist program for the first time. One of the men who did most to first introduce Marxism to France, Jules Guesde (who had coauthored the Workers' Party's precepts, upon Marx's recommendation) was elected an MP for the northern industrial city of Roubaix-Wattrelos.

There was not yet a united socialist party in France, a situation which would be

resolved only in 1905. But despite this fragmentation, socialism's influence was growing. These were decisive years for the French workers' movement — and a period in French history that Engels saw and Marx did not. This also included the establishment of republican institutions, some of which remain central to France's politics still today. Hence, both the importance of Engels's analyses and their distinctness from Marx's own.

Indeed, French political developments took up an essential place in Engels's late correspondence — especially with Lafargue and Marx's daughter Laura. Engels, like Marx, had a sound grasp of French, which was also the language he most often used to communicate with Latin countries in general (for instance, he wrote in French when he prepared prefaces for Italian and Spanish editions of his and Marx's works). He also published short texts addressed to the French socialist movement, for instance, an 1892 piece “For the French workers on the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Paris Commune,” for *Le Socialiste* newspaper.

In these texts, he repeatedly asserted that the period of the French Revolution and Napoleon (1789–1815) had shown the way for nineteenth-century capitalism, far beyond France itself. Telling was his [introduction](#) to the 1892 English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, where he argued this in particularly sharp terms: invoking Napoleon's Civil Code and the example it provided internationally, he asserted that “In France, the Revolution constituted a complete breach with the traditions of the past.”

Engels was sharply critical of the French Republic's scandal-hit political personnel, as in the case of the Panama affair, a corruption case involving many French politicians. In a comment piece in the SPD daily *Vorwärts* on January 13, 1893, Engels blisteringly attacked the “Opportunists' and Radicals' Bourgeois Republic.” But his articles on France also identified particular structural traits of the Republic's political life, including its “neo-Bonapartism” and propensity to look for a savior figure during moments of crisis.

This happened in 1889, when General Georges Boulanger, a former army minister, attempted a coup d'état backed by the far right. If many French socialists saw the general's attempt to overthrow the Republic as a first step toward proletarian revolution, Engels sharply criticized such positions. This crisis also led him to pass sometimes harsh judgments on that portion of the Parisian masses who had been tempted by a “new Bonaparte”; indeed, he saw this movement as turning the workers away from the genuine republican and revolutionary tradition. Admiration for the revolutionary past thus sat alongside a certain disappointment with regard to the French socialists' actual policy.

## **After the Paris Commune**

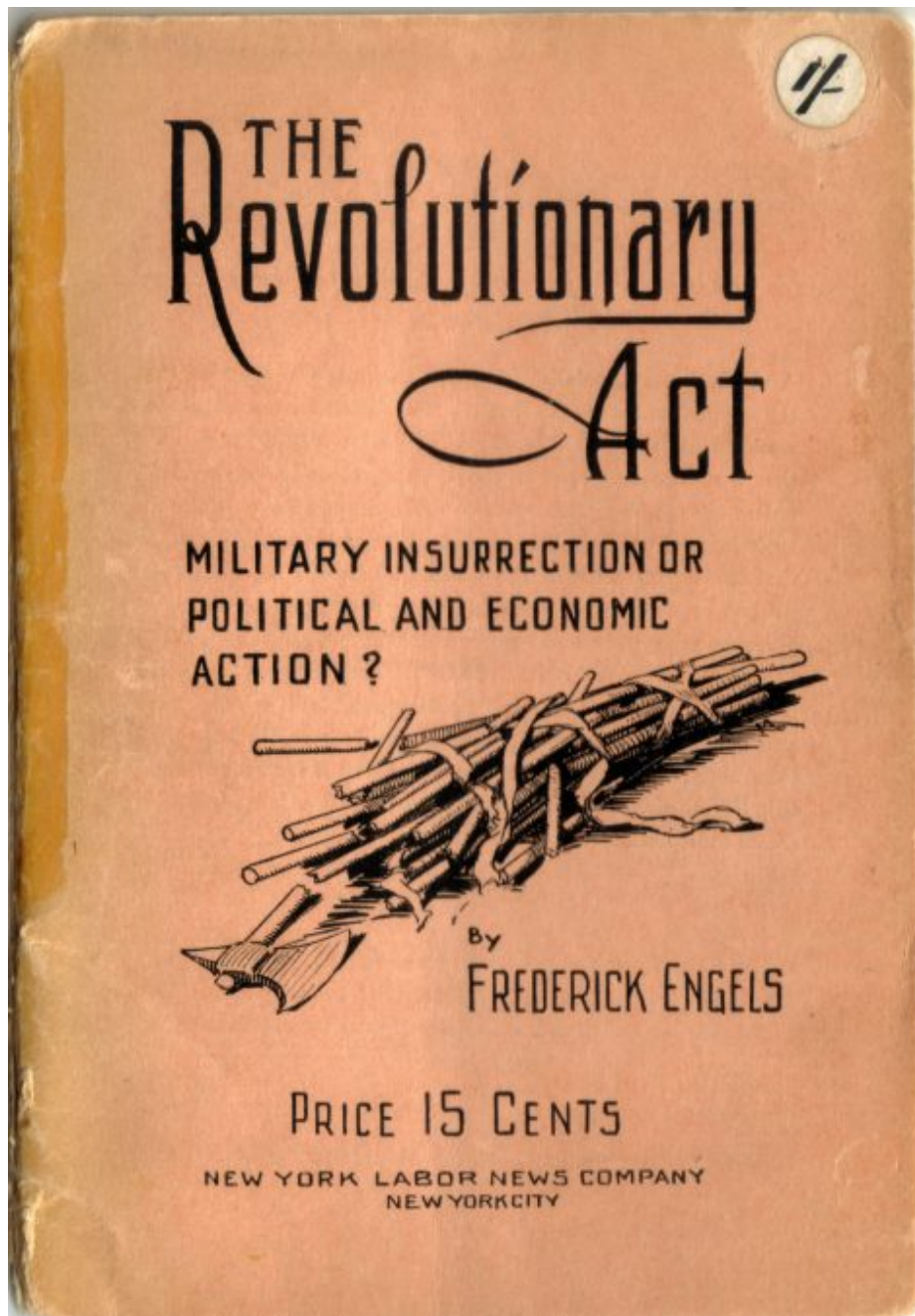
At this point, it is worth addressing an essential historical question: How had the republicans prevailed in France — and how did Engels see this important development? The Republic had been proclaimed in 1870, but in 1871 it had crushed the revolutionary Paris Commune and also seen monarchists win a majority in its own

parliament. Only in 1879 did a clear republican majority emerge, and even then, the Republic was confronted with a series of crises and scandals over the 1880s–1890s — leaving room for doubt that it could avoid overthrow.

In this regard, we see one constant throughout most of Engels's (and Marx's) writings: that in both France and Germany, the Republic was the form best-suited to the class struggle, and which allowed class antagonisms most sharply to come into view. In short, it provided the best framework for the confrontation between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

In a January 15, 1873 article for *Volksstaat*, Engels had stated that “the difference between republic and monarchy” mattered little to him. But he said this at a moment when the French Republic was headed by a very conservative, indeed, anti-republican majority. Here, the Republic seemed to have become an empty word, almost a farce: in such circumstances, Engels could conclude that any battle over political forms was an only secondary issue.

Yet Engels soon showed a more particular sensitivity, noting the progressive developments among a group representing most of the French population — the peasantry. In a January 11, 1878 letter to Johann Philipp Becker, he emphasized the importance of the “de-Bonapartization and republicanization of the peasants.” Similarly, after the May 16, 1877 crisis, which pointed to the threat of the monarchy being restored, Engels noted the people's position in favor of “maintaining the Republic.” Following a similar approach, Engels came to consider the socialists' impact within the Republic as itself essential. In a February 24, 1886 letter to Eduard Bernstein, he took the election of the first Workers' Party MPs in France as “a historic event of great importance.”



## Democratic Republic

In his final years, Engels further deepened his reflection on this question. In [his 1891 preface](#) to Marx's work *The Civil War in France* (as elsewhere) he was still vigorous in insisting on the state's bourgeois class character: as he put it, "the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy." Here, he had in mind the narrowly conservative "Republic" of Adolphe Thiers and Patrice de MacMahon, which had crushed the Paris Commune. But in his critique of the SPD's Erfurt Program (another 1891 text, published *postmortem* in 1901) he clearly considered the Republic a more advanced, indeed necessary, form: "The proletariat can only make use of the republican form, one and indivisible."

“He considered that the workers’ movement’s future advance would no longer necessarily proceed by violent insurrectionary means, as it had in the past.” Above all, this meant nuancing his approach toward republicanism, indeed in the very moment of the republication of Marx’s text on the Paris Commune. Engels advanced the consideration that whereas the Bonapartist state had proceeded with the centralizing traditions of the old monarchy, the post-Revolutionary First Republic (1792–1799) had instead shown the possibility of upholding the autonomy of municipal communes, against the bourgeois state. As Engels now saw things, the First Republic had developed nonauthoritarian forms of radical democracy, a potential basis for the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Many researchers (especially Jacques Texier) have highlighted the importance of the “correction” Engels here operated, as compared to Marx’s *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In that 1852 text, Marx had considered the French Revolution and Napoleon’s Empire as an undivided bloc, which had merely consolidated the growth of the monarchical and then bourgeois state.

For sure, Engels did not publish any text which specified this change in perspective, as compared to Marx. But he clearly did refine his appreciation of the French republican tradition, whose origins (in 1792) he now considered fully positive. Even so, there are also texts where Engels guards against the risk of worker-socialism dissolving into simple bourgeois republicanism. Hence on July 17, 1894, he wrote to Victor Adler: I further told [the French socialists] that, though fusion rather than a mere alliance with the new socialist [MPs] might be their inevitable fate, they should bear in mind the possibility of there being bourgeois elements amongst the latter and that this might involve them in a conflict over principles, in which case a split might become inevitable

Writing to Laura Lafargue a few months later, on January 19, 1895, he nonetheless expressed a certain confidence in the French Socialist MPs:

Anyhow our 50 French Socialist members are in luck. In less than 18 months they have upset three ministries and one president. That shows what a Socialist minority can do in a parliament which, like the French or English, is the really supreme power in the country. A similar power our men in Germany can get by a revolution only ... Engels did not address the Germans or Austrians the same way he did the French, with whom he pursued different strategic objectives. And if he formulated no precise definition of the role that parliamentarism should play within the workers’ movement, everything seems to suggest that he increasingly did recognize the importance of parliamentary and electoral contests. Indeed, this evolution in his thinking was clearly on show in his famous final text (his so-called testament), the 1895 introduction to *Class Struggles in France*.

## **Engels and the Republican Tradition**

So, the French Republic’s advance helped to redefine Engels’s political and strategic outlook. But did this mean that he was giving up on any notion of revolutionary rupture — in favor of a series of stages that would ultimately lead to socialism? Engels did not defend a simple “stageist” road. He considered that the workers’

movement's future advance would no longer necessarily proceed by violent insurrectionary means, as it had in the past. Yet this was not the invention of a "moderate" social-democratic route, as many anti-Marxists and anti-communists would claim after his death.

Rather, this was a renewal of the Marxist analysis of politics and of the state. Insisting on the importance of a longer-term struggle and the need to conquer partial positions within a parliamentary or semi-parliamentary setting — notably and especially within a republican framework — Engels began a line of reflection later developed by other Marxists like Karl Kautsky, Jean Jaurès, Otto Bauer, and Antonio Gramsci, among others.

A proper examination of this long tradition would require a much wider discussion. Here, we shall settle for one last reference, Karl Kautsky's important but relatively neglected *Parliamentarism and Socialism*, first published in 1893. An exact contemporary of the Engels texts which we have discussed, this work emphasizes the importance of the question of parliamentarism and points to the shortcomings of the "direct democracy" then advocated by certain militants. Further, it provides ample illustration of how Marxist thought integrated the question of republican institutions — and thus the contradictory role of the state under capitalism.

Kautsky would further elaborate a series of articles on the theme "Republic and Social Democracy" in his journal *Die Neue Zeit* (recently [translated by Ben Lewis](#)) in which he clearly distinguished the Third Republic from the First Republic of 1792. The republican and revolutionary tradition had followed various different paths: and for Marxists at the end of the nineteenth century, looking back to the experience of the revolutionary First Republic was a way of seeking a way forward different to that of the Third Republic.

The strategic debates from this period also help us understand why, in the longer term, many of the critical questions of French political life would continue to revolve around this same question. Then as now, the word "Republic" conceals any number of different meanings and political traditions. And Friedrich Engels knew this only too well.

A longer version of this article appeared in the first issue of *Mouvement ouvrier. Lutte de classes et révolution. Revue d'histoire*, a new journal dedicated to the history of the workers' movement and its various tendencies. French readers can subscribe by contacting [amis.de.molcer@gmail.com](mailto:amis.de.molcer@gmail.com) or writing to the author at [jean-numa.ducange@univ-rouen.fr](mailto:jean-numa.ducange@univ-rouen.fr).