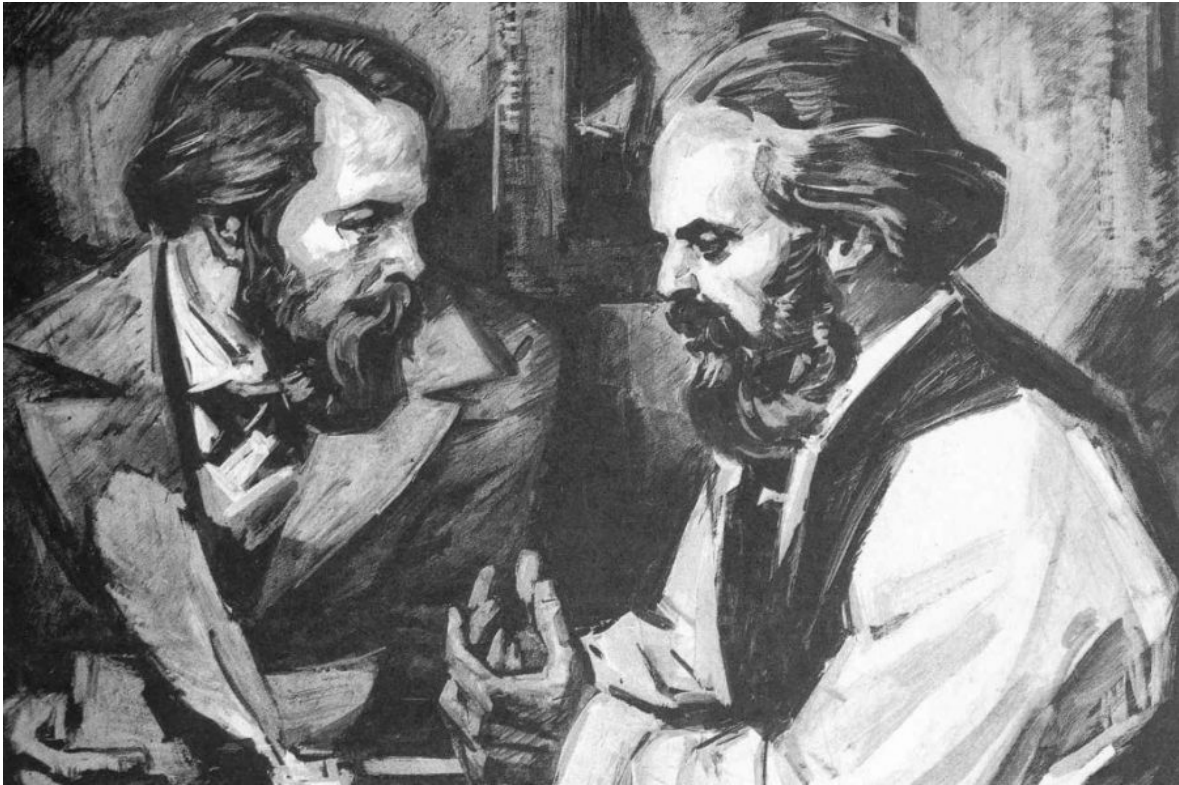


What Engels Gave To Marx and Marxism

Friedrich Engels was far more than Karl Marx's benefactor, or the custodian of his intellectual legacy. When they met as young men in the 1840s, Engels was already an accomplished political writer, who first articulated some of the basic concepts of what became "Marxism."



Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.

This is an extract from Terrell Carver's book [*Engels Before Marx*](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Friedrich Engels took his observational powers to Manchester in December 1842, having just turned twenty-two the month before. In November, en route from Barmen to London, Engels stopped at the newspaper offices of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, meeting with the newly installed editor, Herr Karl Marx.

Marx had fallen into the editorship somewhat by default, and certainly not by experience. At that point Engels had contributed around twice as many articles to the paper as Marx, and Marx had placed only a couple of articles elsewhere at all.

Many years later Engels recalled this meeting between the two of them, saying it was notably cool on Marx's side, given that Marx disapproved of the overly philosophical Berlin set of Young Hegelians. But in his recollections Engels says nothing about the other editors, or indeed how he himself felt about Marx at the time. It must have been clear, though, that Engels was by far the more accomplished writer and indeed publicist for "free thinking" and liberalizing political progress.

And he was the one embarking on a breathtaking adventure to the world's major

economic and military power. Engels had been to England before, his English was fluent, and he was off out of the German states to the wider world of imperial Britain. This was all rather beyond Marx's imagination at the time.

English Perspectives

The news from England was already of some interest in the German-speaking public. Or rather it would be of topical and political interest, unless your interests lay elsewhere — as was certainly the case with the ruling elites — namely in keeping any notion of social change and political innovation firmly at bay. In that case, the less news about England, the better.

Engels was evidently commissioned to continue his career with the *Rheinische Zeitung* with news of liberalizing modernity. These were the themes bannered up under the paper's name: politics, trade, and industry. Writing acutely from sources in the realm of ideas, for people interested in ideas, was a form of political communication at which Engels was adept.

As a "stringer" for a liberalizing newspaper young Friedrich was quite a gift, and of course he was remarkably cheap, probably *gratis*, or nearly so. He was not only externally funded by trade and industry but employed at a major metropolitan center. With that background and that kind of knowledge, and resident at that kind of location, he could add a unique dimension to their ongoing reportage. His politics were progressive and liberalizing, but not — apparently — utopian and visionary. In the journalism of the time in the German states, someone who could write from this modernizing perspective — which was the milieu of the paper's businessmen-editors — was a really valuable asset. And even for those readers perhaps not quite so interested in the conflictual politics of social change, travel writing could certainly be enjoyable, and doubtless help to sell papers. Travel as far as England was rare, and emigrants publishing their experiences as polished journalism even rarer.

Engels's first dispatch, "The English View of the Internal Crises," observes English politics for his readers from an experiential perspective, namely his experience of the English "ruling classes, whether middle class or aristocracy." His experiences of the aristocracy would have been minimal and from hearsay, since he had no connections to such exclusive realms. But for him the middle classes are clearly commercial and obviously of interest, and he singularizes this ideal type for his readers as "the practical Englishman."

This typical businessman sees politics "as a matter of arithmetic or even a commercial affair." In Engels's view, this indifference to the larger world of ideas, or even to "the precarious state of the country," underpins the calm assurance and confidence — "amidst the hustle and bustle of English life," as he put it — that seems odd.

Clearly, Engels finds English commercialism an impressive social force, certainly compared with the reactionary medievalisms in the German states, and quite different from Prussian bureaucratized authoritarianism. In that context, modernizing changes — if any — were to be carefully determined and controlled within the non-constitutional monarchical and Christian confessional state.

The political explosion of Chartism in English life, and at the time, very much in the

streets of the major cities, was a movement for “legal progress” and universal suffrage — the article, as edited through the censorship, doesn’t explain Engels’s scare quotes on legal progress. The key contradiction, for Engels here, is the one between mass agitation for universal (male) suffrage, and the middle-class and aristocratic beneficiaries of the *status quo*.

From 1832 a barely reformed and thus highly unrepresentative parliament, arising from a tiny, privileged (male) electorate and peerage, was firmly in control, “whether Whigs or Tories.” Writing analytically, Engels comments that universal (male) suffrage, as promoted through a decade of Chartist agitation, would put an end to this complacency and “inevitably result in a revolution.”

Dark Tourism

Barely two years later, just turning twenty-four, Engels embarked on a full-length book to be published under his own name. He was contracted to a publisher in Leipzig in the Kingdom of Saxony, where censorship and political conditions were sometimes easier than in Prussia. The book-length volume, *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (“The Condition of the Working Class in England”) is subtitled “From personal observation.” But the author also adds that he is writing from “authentic sources.”

Engels finished the manuscript in the spring of 1845, and, dispatching it to the publishers, he left town for Brussels, to join a coterie of literary radicals who had decamped there to escape the threats and frustrations of neo-medieval repression in Prussia. The book appeared in the summer.

Addressing the working men of Great Britain, Engels presents his book as a picture of their “sufferings and struggles” so that his “German Countrymen” will have a “faithful picture” of their condition. The seriousness of his intentions, he says, can be seen in his use of “official and non-official documents,” a discursive practice that readers today would recognize.

However, he also writes that he isn’t satisfied with a “mere *abstract* knowledge of my subject.” In the first person he says:

I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social and political powers of your oppressors.

This experiential knowledge, Engels relates, also works the opposite way around politically. Alluding to his experiences of dinner parties, port wine, and champagne among the propertied well-off, which his working-class readership would not have had, he draws from his “ample opportunity to watch the middle classes” in order to justify his conclusion: “You [British workers] are right, perfectly right in expecting no support whatever from them.” There follows a tirade of rhetorical questions exposing the hypocrisy of the comfortable classes.

His evident intention was to go beyond the news and reflections of the day to something much more synoptic and — in methodological terms — eclectic. For German-language readers the genre of the book is something aligned to “dark tourism,” that is, travel writing that takes the reader somewhere shocking. And as

Engels says, for English-language readers it's a wake-up call. He makes it clear that the English should consider the situation a national disgrace requiring transformative political action by the state.

“The War of Each Against All”

The historical opening chapters are necessarily written up from published sources in English history and landscape geography, after which the reader journeys to “The Great Towns,” principally London and Manchester. This is where personal observation comes convincingly into its own.

On the one hand, the author-observer gives us a panorama of the port of London: giant docks, thousands of vessels, countless ships, hundreds of steamers. “A man cannot collect himself but is lost in the marvel of England’s greatness.” But how great is it? Londoners there have “been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature,” treating each other with brutal indifference, an unfeeling isolation in private interest, shamelessly barefaced and self-conscious. The “only agreement is a tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement.”

That is clearly observational. The following is experiential: “People regard each other only as useful objects.” Here his further comment is abstractly philosophical: mankind is dissolved “into monads, of which each one has a separate principle,” there is a “social war, the war of each against all,” and “the stronger treads the weaker under foot.” Of course, these were commonplaces, at least in liberalizing circles, rather than philosophical references or philosophizing. But then that was the point — ready intelligibility and effective persuasion.

The message was that, irrespective of class and rank, in these crowds, all “are human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy.” Set against the hierarchical medievalisms of the German states, this is an incendiary notion of equalization, and an abolition of “birth” and “rank” and thus of the whole social “order.”

Sometimes observation and citation work in tandem. Engels identifies Portman Square in London’s West End as “very respectable,” but he picks up, by report, a coroner’s inquest that illustrates the close proximity of rich and wretched in residential districts.

Misery Concealed

When Engels and his readers arrive at the towns surrounding Manchester, the “central city” of south Lancashire, the “classic soil” of English manufacture, observational detail in the narrative becomes explicit. Taking us into Stockport, Engels says, “I do not remember to have seen so many cellars used as dwellings in any other town of this district.” And in Ashton-under-Lyne, he says that he saw “streets in which cottages are getting bad, where the bricks in the house-corners are no longer firm but shift about, in which the walls have cracks and will not hold the chalk whitewash inside.”

In these discussions Engels includes his own line-drawings that illustrate the disorderly, irrational, unplanned patterns of development in Manchester Old Town; the construction of airless “courts” in among buildings that were built in regular lines;

purpose-built back-to-back dwellings; even cost-cutting methods of shoddy brickwork; and his own detailed guide-map of districts, artery-like thoroughfares, canals, rivers, and railways.

But all is not squalor. For contrast we are toured round to see “fine large gardens with superb villa-like houses in their midst.” These are built usually in the Elizabethan, that is, mock Tudor style, which, Engels says, “is to the Gothic precisely what the Anglican Church is to the Apostolic Roman Catholic.” What interests Engels particularly, and what his observational sensibility looks out for, is hypocrisy. This time, it is in the built environment, rather than just in speech or attitude:

The town is peculiarly built so that a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily without coming into contact with a working-people’s quarter or even with workers.

The working people’s quarters are either “sharply separated” from sections “reserved for the middle class,” or concealed among higher-class dwellings and shops. The “upper and middle bourgeoisie” live outside the “girdle” of working-class quarters in “regular streets” or “breezy heights.” Omnibus routes — lined with shops — keep squalor out of sight:

And the finest part of the arrangement is this, that the members of this money aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business.

They can do this “without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left.”

The Industrial Epoch

Analytically, the striking thing about this narration is that Engels makes the reader understand that “everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, [and] belongs to the *industrial epoch*.” The book attracted notice and notoriety at the time in the German-language press but also much more widely and eastward to tsarist Russia. A review of a foreign-language work on such a faraway place, and on such a recondite subject as industrialization, could pass the harshly strict but rather literal-minded censorships of the time.

A scheme to organize society in some other way is not present in the text; the closest that the author gets to such a transformative vision is the lengthy chapter on labor movements, Chartism, and socialism. For Engels, the Chartists are indifferent to the essentially class character of their movement — which was for universal (male) suffrage and parliamentary reform. In that way, and in Engels’s view, they would miss the “knife and fork” question posed by industrial precarity and working-class suffering.

As a political critic, he explains that socialists are dogmatic in their principles and so miss the progressive character of industrial development and working-class immiseration. True “proletarian socialism” must pass through Chartism, he says, “purified of its bourgeois elements,” thus arriving at a “union.”

Almost no one, in English or German, could really connect with Engels’s critique of industrial modernity. This was because it nowhere expounds religious or utopian

visions, which were a readily intelligible genre at the time. Nor does it presume that liberalizing democracy will itself resolve modern poverty through progressive reform. Thus it touched dangerously on revolutionary treason.

His writing balances the human touch of observation, even if not his own, with the geographer's overview of physical systems of production and distribution, and the political economists' parsing of society into working-class producers and middle-class consumers. Class-conscious urban geography is to some extent his invention, though he rarely gets the credit.

The Laws of Private Property

Rather than producing further enlightenment on the facts of English social conditions, the tack next pursued by Engels was to summarize English (though more properly British, to include the Scots) political economy. At the time political economy, as a French and British science of national economic policy, was not unknown in German intellectual circles, but was rather in the process of reception.

The chief authority on the subject was Friedrich List, a liberal-minded political writer who supported a German customs union or *Zollverein*, and thus free trade within a national state framework. In his *Kritik der Nationalökonomie* ("Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy"), Engels necessarily alluded to List's *Das nationale System der politischen Ökonomie* ("National System of Political Economy"), though in two ways: by subject matter, and then by philosophical critique.

Kritik in the title signalled this familiar Germanic approach. Of course, what Engels's title didn't say was that it was a communist critique. The "Outlines" piece is drafted as an essay, evidently for inclusion in a communist publication. Engels's opening shot in his "Outlines" was not merely a forthright expression of communism/socialism — probably echoing the lectures he had heard in Manchester from socialist agitators and organizers — but also a direct swipe at List's advocacy of nation-state-centric mercantilism:

Political economy came into being as . . . a developed system of licensed fraud . . . born of the merchants' mutual envy and greed . . . The nations faced each other like misers . . . eyeing his neighbours with envy and distrust.

The modern "system of free trade," based on Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, "reveals itself" — via Engels's analytical and critical skills — as hypocritical, inconsistent, and immoral. "Just as theology must either regress to blind faith or progress towards free philosophy," he writes, "free trade must produce the restoration of monopolies on the one hand and the abolition of private property on the other." Moreover, he concludes, the nearer to his own time these modern economists are, "the further they depart from honesty" and the more they descend to sophistry. "The only positive advance which liberal economics has made," he avers, is "the elaboration of the laws of private property." These have not been fully worked out and clearly expressed, hence his critique. He says that in "a question of deciding which is the shortest road to wealth," the political economists "have right on their side." What they don't do, and what he promises to do, is to "uncover the contradiction introduced by the free-trade system."

Engels previews this by explaining that political economists are writing from the perspective of consumers, rather than producers. From that vantage point, they have “proclaimed trade to be a bond of friendship and union among nations as among individuals.” But in contrast to this “sham philanthropy,” the premises of political economy, founded in private property, reassert themselves in the facts of industrialization: Malthusian population theory and the “modern slavery” of the factory system.

Dispelling the Fog

The project in the “Outlines” is to dispel the fog of obfuscation, hypocritical self-interest, and moralizing displacement that underlies the theorizations of political economy. To do that Engels examines “the basic categories” — they are as “right” as they are “contradictory,” he says. Yet they are consequential for his readers, and, as he predicts, for humanity.

Pithily he rejects the previous framing terms for the science: national wealth (as in mercantilism), national economy (as with List’s liberal but still nationalist economics), even political or public economy. In a snappy summary he re-christens the whole study “private economy” because “its public connections exist only for the sake of private property.”

The “Outlines” then take the reader through this modern politico-economic study, category-by-category: trade, value, rent, capital, wages. Engels concludes, *pro tem*, that we have “two elements of production in operation.” These are “nature and man, with man again active physically and mentally.” Human activity, in turn, is “dissolved into labour and capital.” Private property fragments “each of these of these elements.” In other words, he concludes, “because private property isolates everyone in his own crude solitariness,” and “because, nevertheless, everyone has the same interest as his neighbour, one landowner stands antagonistically confronted by another, one capitalist by another, one worker by another.” So in “this discord of identical interests” is “consummated the immorality of mankind’s condition hitherto.” And this consummation is competition. Competition presupposes its opposite, monopoly, which is constituted through private property, because only from that basis can it exist. “What a pitiful half-measure, therefore, to attack the small monopolies, and to leave untouched the basic monopoly!”

After that Engels takes up demand, supply, and prices. This descriptive account, and moralized critique, derive from his commercial experiences in Bremen and Manchester, and do not sound particularly strange today: “The speculator always counts on disasters . . . he utilizes everything,” even disasters and catastrophes. Thus “immorality’s culminating point is the speculation on the Stock Exchange” because that is where “mankind is demoted to a means of gratifying the avarice of the calculating or gambling speculator.” And let not the honest “respectable” merchant rise above the gambling on the Stock Exchange, Engels orates — ever the one to pounce on self-serving hypocrisies — he “is as bad as the speculators in stocks and shares.”

In common with the political economics of the day, Engels writes that the competitive

system of commodity production will result in periodic crises of over-production and under-consumption. In that case some people will starve amidst unsold, stockpiled goods and underused productive capacity, while others will get richer or maintain their wealth by taking advantage of scarcity.

This inhuman situation, he writes, will not be resolved through policies designed to reduce the working and consuming populations, as Malthusians were recommending. Those ideas were then current as the nostrum for curing poverty, and so topically of interest to Engels's readership. But there are also chords in Engels's text with more contemporary appeal. He writes a litany:

No capital can stand the competition of another if it is not brought to the highest pitch of activity.

No piece of land can be profitably cultivated if it does not continuously increase its productivity.

No worker can hold his own against his competitors if he does not devote all his energy to labour.

No one at all who enters into the struggle of competition can weather it.

His conclusion is that survival in this realm of inhuman competition defeats "every truly human purpose."

Engels then promises his readers a tour through the British factory system at present and a historical account of its development, obviously intended to forewarn his German readers of their fate. And — as is evident from his comments over the years — he aims to anticipate and prevent the social catastrophes that will arise within circumstances already present.

Marx After Engels — Engels After Marx

Karl Marx was electrified. He immediately drafted a "Summary" of Engels's critique, following closely his presentation of the economic categories. When Engels passed through Paris on his return from his posting in Manchester to the family HQ in Barmen, he called again to revisit the former *Rheinische Zeitung* collective. In conversations there it seems that Marx took the initiative in proposing a collaboration between the two.

His plan was for a polemical attack on the "critical critics," who — within these Young Hegelian circles — were for him insufficiently radical. Their political confusions followed from their philosophical confusions, and their failure to take Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion to the logical and thoroughly political conclusion of atheism. Engels kicked off with three chapters, followed by a fourth with separately authored sections.

After that, and with Engels absent, having gone back home to Barmen, Marx's able pen ran away with the remainder of the planned pamphlet, and made it into an over-length book. In correspondence Engels complained that he was rather nonplussed by this. However, it is clear from the title page that he was the lead author, as was certainly right by reputation and experience. Marx was miles behind: just a couple of dozen genuinely published items, mostly in his own newspaper, and all quite brief, nothing even so long as a pamphlet.

The modern editions of collected works pad out this period in Marx's list of works with posthumously published manuscript materials, so the contrast is less obvious. And these editions also generally disguise the lead-author situation by presenting *The Holy Family* as a book by "Marx and Engels." This minor falsification follows teleologically from a much later

narrative about the originary and enduring character of their partnership. Engels was certainly unaware of this narrative at the time, because everyone else was, too. But we have already had a sign that young Friedrich is "disappearing" himself into the shadow of the more dominating intellect, though far less successful writer, in terms of publications and reputation. Writing to Marx in a letter dated 22 February–7 March 1845, Engels exclaims from Barmen: "*The Critical Criticism* has still not arrived!" This is the pamphlet that they had agreed to publish together, though evidently not to write together. They were each contributing separately authored and signed chapter sections.

Engels continues: "Its new title, *Die heilige Familie* ("The Holy Family"), will probably get me into hot water with my pious and already highly incensed parent, though you, of course, could not have known that." That remark seems unduly deferential. After all, Marx could surely have known or guessed what the family consequences would be for his co-author in a repressively Christian state and locality, even if some enlightened members of his own family circle would have found such blasphemy amusingly inconsequential.

Engels then says, "I see from the announcement that you have put my name first." That seems, again, deferential and faux-naïf — for Marx, the reasoning would have been obvious. "Why?" Engels asks. "I contributed practically nothing to it and anyone can identify your style." Marx had indeed run away with the project, and Engels is giving him license to do so, and to take the lead.

Others departed Marx's company, in one way or another. Engels did not.

Aufwiedersehen dem Jüngling. Farewell to Engels before Marx.