



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

Reexamining Engels's Legacy in the 21st Century

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Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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Editor

Kohei Saito
Department of Economics
Osaka City University
Osaka, Japan

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PREFACE

It's been 200 years since the birth of Friedrich Engels, the closest and life-long comrade of Karl Marx as well as the founder of Marxism. Inevitably, throughout the course of history, the evaluation of Engels has wavered and changed dramatically. Today we are in a position to examine the true legacy of Engels's theory beyond the sterile opposition between traditional Marxism and Western Marxism.

It is certain that Engels's achievements in the history of Marxism are—with the exception of Marx himself—incomparably high. As Terrell Carver points out, it was not Marx's *Capital* but Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that was most read among books on Marxism.¹ Furthermore, the leaders of the Second International, as well as those who led the first successful Marxist seizure of state power in the Russian Revolution, were heavily influenced by Engels's views on history, the state and revolution. What these traditional Marxists thought of as Marxism was actually Marx's theory heavily influenced by the late Engels.

Engels edited Marx's economic manuscripts and published them as Volume II and III of *Capital*. He also edited and republished various books, pamphlets, and articles by Marx after his death. In doing so, he added new prefaces and introductions, sometimes even emending and modifying original texts written by Marx. Thus, it is no coincidence that

¹Terrell Carver, *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983), 119.

the popularity of Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, as well as his systematic intervention in Marx's writings, determined the course of Marxism in the twentieth century.

The reason for Engels's success is largely owing to the simplification of Marx's theory in addition to his sharp analysis of concrete social and political events. Engels clearly recognized that the extensive scope of Marx's project goes far beyond any short-sighted view of the interests of workers' and socialist movements, which made the wide reception of Marx's theory among workers difficult. The essence of Engels's theoretical endeavor is thus not a simple deformation of Marx's theory, but rather the reconstruction of its key elements in a way that was adjustable to and compatible with socialist and workers' movements at the time.

With hindsight, one can say that the conditions for a post-capitalist society such as Marx anticipated did not exist in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In the absence of the conditions for socialism Engels did his best to formulate an ideology to counter the capitalist ideology of the modernization but *within* the modern social system of nation-states. In this attempt, he overemphasized certain aspects of Marx's theory such as rationalism, positivism, progressive view of history, productivism, and Eurocentrism. However, precisely because of this strategy, Engels's attempt turned out to be quite successful. As Michael Heinrich points out, Marxism provided "a comprehensive intellectual orientation" for the working class.² Without Engels's re-assembling of Marx's theory, the enormous success of Marxism in the twentieth century would have been impossible.

Nevertheless, insofar as the secret of Engels's success was based on his uncritical appraisal of the modernization process, Marxism was not able to provide a theoretical scope that truly goes beyond modern capitalist society. As Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out,³ Marxism in the centers of the capitalist world-system has turned into social democracy, demanding reforms of capitalist economy under representative democracy. In the semi-peripheries and peripheries where socialist revolutions were successful, as Wallerstein says, Marxism has only functioned as an ideology that legitimizes industrialization and modernization under

²Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 24.

³See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

“state capitalism,” an undemocratic political form. Ultimately, “actually existing socialist countries” remained trapped within the global system of sovereign states.⁴

In this vein, Engels’s theoretical intervention came to be regarded as the reason for the political dogmatization of “Marxism.” As a result, he was severely accused of the “deformation” of Marx’s own theory. As discussed in this volume, Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch criticized Engels already in the 1920s, and Engels’s “scienticism” was also criticized from the “humanist” standpoint of the young Marx in the 1960s.

Furthermore, because the new complete works of Marx and Engels (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*) provides easier access to Marx’s own manuscripts and notebooks, a series of works has emerged which investigate the intellectual relationship between Marx and Engels more critically.⁵ However, there are also Marxist scholars who point to the one-sided character of the criticisms raised by Post-Marxism. John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, for example, explore the rich theoretical possibilities of Engels’s dialectical investigations of nature in terms of contemporary ecological thinking.⁶

In any case, (re)reading Engels today is somewhat different from doing so in the past. At the early stage of Marxism, Engels was uncritically identified with Marx’s own theory, which made traditional Marxism very dogmatic. In the course of the twentieth century, various critical attempts to distance Engels’s theory from traditional Marxism emerged. However, in the twenty-first century, after the demise of actually existing socialism, as well as the decay of Marxist social and political movements, it is possible to examine the legacy of Engels’s analysis of capitalism more soberly.

For example, Wolfgang Streek, in his recent article in *New Left Review*, has reinterpreted Engels’s interest in military issues historically, attempting to formulate a new theoretical foundation for the analysis of warfare and

⁴ See Paresh Chattopadhyay, *The Marxian Concept of Capital and the Soviet Experience: Essay in the Critique of Political Economy* (Westport: Praeger, 1994).

⁵ Kohei Saito, “Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship Revisited from an Ecological Perspective,” in *Marx’s Capital After 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*, ed. Marcello Musto (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁶ John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-critique* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

the inter-state-system in the twentieth century.⁷ In addition, Paul Blackledge, in his article published in *Monthly Review*, points out how the young Engels, independently of Marx, formulated some key theses of Marxism. In fact, Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England* remains quite useful for analyzing the contemporary capitalist system, because his sharp and pioneering insights continue to astonish today's readers.⁸

Like Streek and Blackledge, the contributors to this volume aim at new theoretical interventions and reevaluation of Engels's legacy on the bicentenary occasion of his birth. In this way, the volume attempts to critically reexamine the merits and limits of Engels's theory in the twenty-first century. The book consists of four parts.

In Part I, Regina Roth and Ryuji Sasaki discuss the issue of class in Engels's theory. In Chapter 1 Roth explores the sources which Engels used for his well-known analysis of the *Condition of the Working Class in England*, focusing on the role of technology. She evaluates Engels's claims from today's standpoint, discussing their validity and limits. In Chapter 2 Sasaki rethinks Engels's theory of class struggle, focusing on his *The Peasant War in Germany* written in 1850.

In Part II, Engels's philosophy will be critically analyzed, particularly in relation to epistemology and ontology in German Idealism. In Chapter 3 Tom Rockmore critically investigates whether Engels's reflection theory of knowledge, as well as any form of materialism on which he relies, could overcome the traditional philosophical problem of knowledge. In Chapter 4 Kaan Kangal examines Engels's dialectics in the *Dialectics of Nature* and shows that, unlike Hegel, his dialectic is intended to work *against* metaphysics.

Part III discusses Engels's theory of crisis as well as post-capitalism. In Chapter 5 Timm Graßmann reconstructs Engels's theory of crisis. According to Graßmann, not only Engels's insider and commercial knowledge, but also his numerous observations and analyses, inspired and shaped Marx's view. Engels made a major contribution to the analysis of both the empirical workings and the spirit of capitalism. In Chapter 6 Kohei Saito revisits the problem of the intellectual relationship between

⁷Wolfgang Streek, "Engels's Second Theory," *New Left Review* 123 (June/July 2020).

⁸Paul Blackledge, "Engels vs. Marx?: Two Hundred Years of Frederick Engels," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 1 (May 2020).

Marx and Engels. Here Saito uses Georg Lukács's theory of metabolism that was developed in the *Ontology of Social Being* in order to show that Engels's conception of labor plays a key role in Lukács's theory of crisis. In Chapter 7 Seongjin Jeong explores Engels's vision of socialism. Contrary to conservative or anarchist accusations, Jeong shows that Engels belongs to the tradition of socialism from below, that is, democratic socialism, along with Marx, envisioning post-capitalism as the free and full development of "association."

Part IV "Engels at the Margins" deals with new fields opened up within Engels's theory, such as gender, ecology, colonialism, and anthropology. In Chapter 8 Camilla Royle argues that an ecological sensibility is evident throughout Engels's work, especially his writings on urban life. According to Royle, Engels's sharp criticism of proposed solutions to the problem of poor housing, that were based on the acquisition of commodities, is relevant to debates over environmental strategy today. In Chapter 9 Heather Brown assesses the legacy of Engelsian feminism, both positive and negative, and suggests future areas of study that will contribute, from a Marxist perspective, to the important discussion of intersectional relationships between class and gender.

In Chapter 10 Soichiro Sumida argues that Engels was ahead of Marx in research on political economy and on Ireland. Their correspondence from the 1850s and 1860s also shows that Marx's fully fledged Irish studies relied heavily on Engels's findings. Nevertheless, Sumida concludes that Marx's theory of capitalist colonialism is clearly different from the late Engels's view on Ireland. In Chapter 11 Thomas C. Patterson explores the legacy of Engels's contributions to contemporary anthropological inquiry. Patterson examines selected works by Engels in chronological order—*The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man* (1876), and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

In an Afterword, Terrell Carver reflects upon all the contributions by asking "What is Friedrich Engels?" The question remains an open one because different approaches to Engels in different historical conjunctures always produce new answers, and not always in relation to Marx.

Osaka, Japan
Tokyo, Japan

Kohei Saito
Ryuji Sasaki

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

- Heather A. Brown** Westfield State University, Westfield, MA, USA
- Timm Graßmann** Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany
- Seongjin Jeong** Gyeongsang National University, Jinju, South Korea
- Kaan Kangal** Nanjing University, Nanjing, China
- Thomas C. Patterson** University of California, Riverside, CA, USA
- Tom Rockmore** Peking University, Beijing, China
- Regina Roth** Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany
- Camilla Royle** King's College London, London, UK
- Kohei Saito** Graduate School of Economics, Osaka City University, Osaka, Japan
- Ryuji Sasaki** Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan
- Soichiro Sumida** University of Oldenburg, Berlin, Germany

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PART I

Engels and Class



Engels's *Condition of the Working Class
in England* in the Context of Its Time
(1845–1892)

Regina Roth

The nineteenth century was a period marked by rapid and thoroughgoing social and economic changes. The most striking aspect of these changes lay in the development of technology. Across a number of fields the rate of innovation was gaining pace and leading to ground-breaking inventions. England was at the center of these developments, it was the home of the industrial revolution and was described at the time as the “workshop of the world.” Machines and inventions were taken as signs of a new era. In 1829, the historical and literary writer Thomas Carlyle wrote

I would like to thank Joel Rasbash for his very careful translation of a German version of my text into English, and Jef van Heijsters for putting the finishing touches to the text. Responsibility for the final text is, of course, my own.

R. Roth (✉)
Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany
e-mail: roth@bbaw.de

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of the “age of machinery,”¹ and the English novelist and future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli made the following observation in one of his early novels from 1844: “cities [were] peopled with machines.”²

Frederick Engels, son of a thriving textile entrepreneur in the Wupper Valley, also showed great interest in the innovations of the day. As an 18-year old, while apprenticed to a friend of his father’s in the wholesale trade in Bremen, Engels published several articles in German newspapers and periodicals. These included an article in October 1840 about steamships, in which Engels discussed the invention of the double-propeller and reported on some of the early tests that the British had been carrying out.³

This article appeared in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, an influential newspaper also known as the *Augsburger Allgemeine*, which was widely read. The publisher, Johann Georg von Cotta, had received an article from Engels for the daily *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser*. He responded by offering the young writer a contract to act as the Bremen correspondent for his daily newspaper, which Engels undertook from August 1840 to February 1841—contributing five articles.⁴ Engels made his debut as a journalist in the *Telegraph für Deutschland*, for which he wrote 15 articles between March 1839 and December 1841, mostly under the pseudonym Friedrich Oswald. The editor of the *Telegraph* was the German poet and publicist Karl Gutzkow. Engels’s first article was his “Letters from Wuppertal” in March 1839.⁵ Gutzkow was keen to have young authors contributing to his paper, however, he was critical of “Letters from Wuppertal,” remarking to the publicist Alexander Jung that: “I had to make a number of corrections, and also had to edit out some of the descriptions of personalities that were too lurid. Since then he has sent me much that I regularly have to rework.”⁶ In his articles Engels revealed himself to be a critical observer of his times. His themes mainly

¹ Emma Griffin, *A Short History of the British Industrial Revolution*. 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 84.

² Carl B. Frey, *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor, and Power in the Age of Automation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 112.

³ See Friedrich Engels, *Korrespondenzen aus Bremen*, in MEGA I/3, 192–198.

⁴ See the Cotta’s letter to Engels, 8/7/1840 in MEGA I/3, 673. The five articles are published in MEGA I/3, 134–150, 199–202, 208–209, see also 679–680.

⁵ Friedrich Engels, *Briefe aus dem Wuppertal*, in MEGA I/3, 32–51, 666–667.

⁶ See MEGA I/3, 671–672.

focused on culture, literature, and religion, but he also wrote about social conflict, especially in the textile factories in the Wupper Valley.⁷

In his activities as a journalist Engels showed an ever greater interest in scientific and technological developments. In the spring of 1844, he wrote an article for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, “Outline of a critique of Political Economy.”⁸ In the article he showed that inventions, when looked at from a strictly economic viewpoint, had undoubtedly increased productivity, but that it was the owners who gained the profit. He also mentioned the latest advances in scientific knowledge, especially in chemistry, with the work of Claude-Louis de Berthollet and Justus von Liebig, as well as in mechanics, with James Watt and Edmund Cartwright. He saw the value of these innovations applying equality to agriculture as well as to industry—seeing great potential in the former. He held that it was an inescapable conclusion that an immeasurable increase in productive capacity could support a growing population, in contrast to the pessimistic views of the economist Thomas R. Malthus.⁹ Even in later years he continued to show an interest in science and inventions. For instance there was his friendship with the German chemist Carl Schorlemmer, who came to Manchester in 1859 as a lecturer at Owen College and was appointed as a member of the Royal Society.¹⁰ Later, in the 1870s his multi-faceted studies were reflected in the work *Dialectics of Nature* (MEGA² I/26), as well as in his exchanges with Marx concerning the latest developments in science (i.e., Engels’s letter to Marx, 23/11/1882).

Yet Engels is far better known for his skepticism, and as an unrelenting critic of the deep economic and social transformations wrought by industrialization. No work has played a more central role in establishing this reputation than *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which was published at the end of May 1845 by the Leipzig publisher Otto

⁷ Engels, *Briefe aus dem Wuppertal*, in MEGA I/3, 35. See also Engels’s critical remarks in his article about migrants in Bremerhaven, in MEGA I/3, 143.

⁸ Engels used in the title of his article the term “Nationalökonomie” which was frequently employed in nineteenth-century German to translate the term “Political Economy.”

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie*, in MEGA I/3, 478–479, 486, 490.

¹⁰ Tristram Hunt, *The Frock-Coated Communist: The Life and Times of the Original Champagne Socialist* (London: Penguin, 2009), 207, 285.

Wigand. At a good 350 pages, Engels managed to write the book in just six months following his return from Manchester. His father had sent him there in 1842 so that he could represent his family's interests in the firm Ermen & Engels, while at the same time gaining an education in business. Despite being in Manchester for only a few years (from November 1842 to August 1844) he had time to pursue his own interests and goals.

He explored the city and its environs while immersing himself in the lively public debates which were possible because of the freedom of the press, as well as freedom of association and assembly. He read newspapers, busied himself with the literature concerning social and political questions, visited libraries, and attended events, especially those held by Chartists and Owenites. The Chartists were named after the so-called People's Charter and campaigned primarily around universal male suffrage. In 1838 they published their six key demands for electoral reform in the "People's Charter." The Owenites were British socialists and supporters of the Scottish industrialist Robert Owen, who owned a textile factory in which child labor had been abolished and working conditions substantially improved. Owen also developed arguments for a fundamental transformation of the economy and society, which found a widespread and receptive audience among the British public. Both groups organized what they called, "Halls of Science," as well as public lectures on a variety of themes. They also published their own newspapers. Engels was particularly struck by the way the Owenites had developed new concepts for analyzing the state and society. Through them he became acquainted with "political economy," a recent intellectual discipline that had been closely associated with the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith, and which sought to provide an explanation for economic processes and their repercussions in society. Engels made contact with the editors of the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star* as well as the Owenite newspaper *The New Moral World*, corresponding with them on social movements occurring on the continent. At the same time, he supplied articles to periodicals and newspapers in Cologne, Paris, and Zürich concerning developments in Britain. In this way, Engels played a dual intermediary role, firstly by connecting oppositional movements in Western Europe, and secondly by helping these movements to develop their analysis of economic questions.

Engels gathered information concerning the condition of workers in Britain, where he could draw upon an established body of statistical surveys and sociographical data. Not only could he use population

data that had begun to be gathered with the first Census of 1801, but he could also benefit from new methods and processes by which “the state could observe itself” (these methods became more widespread in other countries as the century progressed). Engels also had access to official parliamentary and government enquiries known as the “Blue Books,” which were made available to the public. They covered a range of themes from the condition of housing, to the state of health in particular cities or regions.¹¹ Statistical societies had recently been established in Manchester (the *Manchester Statistical Society* of 1833) as well as in London (the *London Statistical Society* of 1834) and conducted investigations furnishing a wealth of data on many topics. The statistical societies pursued differing goals. In London they centered round the political economist Richard Jones and included professors such as Adolphe Quetelet and well-known personalities like Charles Babbage. They mainly focused on deepening David Ricardo’s deductive method, by combining his abstract principles, which set out the mechanics of the economy, with a body of data, in the hope of being able to develop systematic laws akin to those achieved in the natural sciences. In contrast, in Manchester it was bankers, entrepreneurs, and doctors who were the driving forces behind the statistical society, whose aim lay in social and political reform.¹²

A number of works were published in this milieu, which did much to put questions such as the condition of the lower-classes and awareness of urban problems such as housing, sanitation, and epidemics onto the political agenda. The work of doctors such as James Phillips Kay (1832) and Peter Gaskell (1833) as well as Thomas Carlyle’s “Condition of England Question” became influential in the debates of the 1840s.¹³ Engels searched through newspapers for articles on these questions and especially for individual cases. In 1845 he stressed that he wanted to

¹¹Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2009), 57; Matthias Bohlender, *Metamorphosen des liberalen Regierungsdenkens. Politische Ökonomie, Polizei und Pauperismus* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2007), 296, 348.

¹²Lawrence Goldman, “The Origins of British ‘Social Science’: Political Economy, Natural Science, and Statistics, 1830–1835,” *The Historical Journal* 26 (1983).

It should be added that the London society eventually developed an agenda that focused on using statistics to create practical measures to alleviate social problems.

¹³Michael Levin, *The Condition of England Question. Carlyle, Mill, Engels* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 42–43.

focus on “liberal” source material,¹⁴ yet among the papers he read, an overwhelming proportion came from oppositional sources. Engels also established contacts with compatriots such as the merchant and poet Georg Weerth or the publicist and political activist Jakob Venedey. He also met an Irish woman, Mary Burns, who was presumably a factory worker or housemaid, and who subsequently became Engels’s partner. In this way, Engels was able to build a personal network with which he could exchange information, literature, and ideas. It was most likely through Venedey that Engels got to attend demonstrations, such as the weavers’ protest against female labor. It was at these events that he met the Chartist James Leach, who ran a book and newspaper shop in which Engels could find the literature he needed.¹⁵ It is also conceivable that through Mary Burns he was able to make contact with workers’ families, and especially Irish ones. However, the representation of Irish workers and their families in the “Condition” was almost entirely based on anti-Irish prejudices that were common in Britain at the time.¹⁶

With these materials, Engels developed a form of social reportage that joined the ranks of a genre that had been developing since the turn of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, Engels wanted to research “reality” and immerse himself in “real living things.” On the other hand, he wanted to keep a “charge-sheet” (*Sündenregister*) of the crimes of “the bourgeoisie” (letter to Marx, 19/11/1844). In his polemical indictment, he speaks of the radical exploitation of the workers and does not even hold back from accusing the bourgeoisie of murder—that is the “social murder” which society inflicts upon the workers.¹⁷

The central themes of *The Condition* include: the development of industrialization, the significance of steam power and machinery, the concentration of capital and economic crises, the catastrophic working conditions in the factories, mines and workshops, and the dangers for

¹⁴Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (New York: John W. Lovell, 1887), 10.

¹⁵Jakob Venedey, *England* vol. 3 (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1845), 252, 263, 271; Harry Schmidtgal, *Friedrich Engels’s Manchester-Aufenthalt 1842–1844* (Trier: Karl-Marx-Haus, 1981), 60; Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815–60* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 34, 166.

¹⁶Regina Roth, “Engels’s Irlandbild in seiner Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England von 1845” *Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch 2011*; Hunt, *The Frock-Coated Communist*, 107.

¹⁷Engels, *The Condition*, 19.

female workers and child laborers in Britain. At the same time, Engels provided a thorough description of the consequences of urbanization for the workers' standard of living, their cramped housing conditions, lack of educational opportunities, and poor health. Finally, he discussed the question of how the laborers should organize themselves, the role of the state, and whether it was possible for the state of misery to be overthrown. Engels's goal lay in a fundamental improvement in the condition of the workers. In his view this meant only one path. The class struggle between the capitalists and workers could not be won by reforms instituted by the employers or the state—only a revolution could fundamentally change the situation.

Engels devoted a major portion of the work to a description of urbanization as a consequence of the spread of industrial production, beginning with the housing conditions of workers in cities that had witnessed rapid industrialization. Although he considered a number of cities including London, Dublin, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, he mainly focused on Manchester and the surrounding region. By the 1840s this city in the heart of northwest England was regarded as a kind of “shock city” and a “symbol of a new age.”¹⁸ Engels was not the first person to describe dense housing tenements, cramped unpaved streets, air pollution, missing sewage, and the lack of waste disposal or clean running water. Many critics, both British and non-British, had pointed to the impact of industrialization on cities long before Engels. There had already been an outcry over “urban overcrowding” and the dangers it posed to public health in Manchester.¹⁹ While partially stemming back to the period after the Napoleonic War in 1815, fascination with the city peaked in the 1840s. Contemporaries, and not only intellectuals, were drawn by the vitality of the city and the new ideas that were coming out of it.²⁰ Yet it is the image that Engels painted that has exerted a particular influence over the twenty and twenty-first centuries. There is barely a social history of England in the nineteenth

¹⁸ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth: Ed. Penguin, 1992), 56, 88; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 399.

¹⁹ Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived. Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820–1940* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 16.

²⁰ Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 93–94.