



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

# Friedrich Engels for the 21st Century

Reflections and Revaluations



*Edited by*  
Terrell Carver · Smail Rasic

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# Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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Editors

# Friedrich Engels for the 21st Century

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ISSN 2524-7123

ISSN 2524-7131 (electronic)

Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

ISBN 978-3-030-97137-3

ISBN 978-3-030-97138-0 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97138-0>

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Cover illustration: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Terrell Carver is very grateful to colleagues for organizing the international conference “*Die Aktualität eines Klassikers—The Timeliness of a Historic Figure*” at the Bergische Universität-Wuppertal, 19–21 February 2020, in celebration of the bicentenary of the birth of Friedrich Engels. The present volume derives from contributions to, and discussions at, that very exciting and historic forum for scholarly interchange and collaboration.

Smail Rasic would like to thank colleagues from European countries, South and East Asia and the Americas who made the trip to the Engels conference in Wuppertal, Germany, to celebrate the bicentenary. The papers they presented there show that Engels was indeed a talented writer and is still an important political figure, remarkable in any century, and particularly for the twenty-first.

## PRAISE FOR *FRIEDRICH ENGELS* FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

“This impressively internationalist collection is an essential read for those interested in Engels in his own right rather than as just a “second fiddle” to Marx. All contributions present fresh perspectives based on the latest research. They do full justice to the many areas in which Engels displayed his prodigious talents.”

—David McLellan, *Professor Emeritus of Political Theory, University of Kent, UK*

“Based on the results of archival research, this book contributes to the liberation of Engels from the entrenched image that he is the man who distorted and dogmatized Marx’s theory. This will allow us to appreciate Engels as an independent theorist and to understand his great achievements as they really are.”

—Ryuji Sasaki, *Associate Professor of Economics, Rikkyo University, Japan*

“This fascinating collection of nineteen essays by an international cast of distinguished authors—expertly edited by Terrell Carver and Smail Rasic—reconsiders Engels’s many projects, problems, and prospects. Engels here gets the attention he sorely deserves as a solo act. Highly recommended.”

—James Farr, *Professor of Political Science, Northwestern University, USA*

“This impressive collection demolishes the notion that Engels paved the way for a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism or that he was merely a populariser of Marx’s ideas. Instead, it establishes Engels as an independent and creative Marxist thinker whose ideas continue to enlighten us in the 21st century.”

—Camilla Royle, *Fellow in Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, UK*

“This timely volume on Engels corrects a number of misconceptions about this fundamentally important yet underrated thinker. Its richness in historical detail offers new insights into Engels’s work and presents a genuinely interdisciplinary and global reading. It will be of great interest for scholars and students of politics, history, ecology and philosophy the world over.”

—Shannon Brincat, *Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia*

“Why should we continue to read Engels in the 21st century? Because—as leading experts in the world establish here—the breadth and depth of his contribution to the critical social sciences is remarkable, and its resonance palpable. If you want to learn more about Marx’s too often underestimated and misunderstood intellectual partner—and you should—then you must read this book.”

—David Bates, *Professor of Contemporary Political Thought & School Director of Research and Enterprise, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK*

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	Smail Ropic	
<b>Part I Epistemology and Philosophy of Nature</b>		
<b>2</b>	<b>Engels and the Dialectic of Nature</b>	<b>33</b>
	Sean Sayers	
<b>3</b>	<b>Engels and the “<i>Dialectics of Nature</i>”</b>	<b>53</b>
	Kaan Kangal	
<b>4</b>	<b>Was Engels a Dialectical Materialist?</b>	<b>71</b>
	Smail Ropic	
<b>5</b>	<b>Engels and the End of Philosophy</b>	<b>89</b>
	Changfu Xu	
<b>Part II Political Economy</b>		
<b>6</b>	<b><i>Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy: The is/Ought Question</i></b>	<b>109</b>
	Hans Frambach	
<b>7</b>	<b>The Young Engels and the Critique of Capitalism: His Influence on the Young Marx</b>	<b>127</b>
	Marco Solinas	

8	Engels on the “External Market” and “Deindustrialization” Prabhat Patnaik	145
<b>Part III The Condition of the Working Class</b>		
9	The Constitution of the Proletariat: Bringing Together Friedrich Engels, Edward P. Thompson and Michael Vester Heinz Sünker	163
10	The Question of Housing Revisited Regina Kreide	187
<b>Part IV Theorizing Power</b>		
11	Engels Theorizes Gender Hierarchy in <i>The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State</i> Terrell Carver	211
12	The Concept of Power in Engels’s Theory of the State Ana María Miranda Mora	229
13	Re-Reading Engels in the Twenty-First Century: State, Nationalism, and Internationalism Michael Forman	247
<b>Part V Engels and Literature</b>		
14	The Proletariat and the “People”: Engels and the “Social Prose” of the 1840s Wolfgang Lukas	271
15	Engels’s Philosophical Mock-Epic: <i>The Triumph of Faith</i> Mattia Luigi Pozzi	289
16	Engels and German Literature: A Political History to the Present Anne-Rose Meyer	311

**Part VI Emancipation—Revolution—Communism**

- 17 Engels on Post-capitalist Society: Continuity or Discontinuity with Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism?** 335  
Peter Hudis
- 18 Engels and the Remaking of Communism in the Twenty-First Century** 355  
Regletto Aldrich Imbong
- 19 Afterword: Whither Engels?** 373  
Terrell Carver
- Index** 385

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- MECW* Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *Collected Works in 50 volumes*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2010 (series complete).
- MEGA* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1972– (series in progress).
- MEW* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Werke*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956–68 (series complete).



# Introduction

*Smail Ropic*

After the end of so-called actually existing socialism in eastern Europe, Friedrich Engels was largely forgotten in German-speaking academic and public life. The interest in Marx, re-ignited in the wake of the 2008 world financial crisis, did not spread to his contributions to the Marxist tradition. Only on the occasion of his 200th birthday did a series of innovative research contributions appear.

The decades-long lack of interest in Engels in the German-speaking world was due in no small measure to the notion, which became entrenched under the influence of some well-known authors, that Engels—unlike Marx himself—had provided the impetus for the dogmatization of Marxism in “actually existing socialist” states. According to this widespread view, Marxism was really an “Engels-ism”.<sup>1</sup> The first part of the following chapter outlines the origin of this view of Engels. I then critically discuss how it was updated by Ingo Elbe and Samuel Salzborn, before turning to recent research exploring the connection of science and

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politics in Engels's publications. This research contradicts the thesis that his thinking has a fundamentally dogmatic character. Furthermore, works published on the occasion of the Engels bicentenary, which consider his role in the socialist movement, fundamentally challenge the prevailing view that there is a direct link between Engels's journalistic-political activities and "actually existing socialism". Finally, I provide a brief overview of an innovative anthology that treats the intersections between Engels's writings and the literature of his time, assessing his literary impact.

## CONTROVERSIES IN RECENT GERMAN-LANGUAGE INTERPRETATIONS OF ENGELS

### *Is "Marxism" an "Engels-Ism"?*

The term "Marxism" emerged in the 1870s as a hostile designation within the socialist movement.<sup>2</sup> Marx and Engels themselves initially used it with critical undertones. Its widespread use as an affirmative self-designation since the 1880s can be traced back to Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein. Engels made this sense of the term his own, although not without reservations.

In 1887 Engels described his role in his collaboration with Marx as follows:

As a consequence of the division of labour that existed between Marx and myself, it fell to me to present our views in the periodical press, and, therefore, particularly in the fight against opposing views, in order that Marx should have time for the elaboration of his great main work. This made it necessary for me to present our views for the most part in a polemical form, in opposition to other views.<sup>3</sup>

Engels's journalistic activities helped the "Marxian school of history"<sup>4</sup> to have a formative influence on the socialist movement. His greatest success was the pamphlet *Anti-Dühring*, which first appeared in a series of articles in *Vorwärts* [*Forward*], the newspaper of the *Sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* [Social-Democratic Workers Party of Germany] (1877–1878). Three chapters of this work were subsequently published in a separate edition under the title of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (French in 1880, German in 1882). V.I. Lenin counted *Anti-Dühring* among the "handbooks for every class-conscious worker".<sup>5</sup> That view became canonical in the "actually existing socialist" countries

of eastern Europe. The editor's introduction to the *Anti-Dühring* in Vol. I/27 of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, published in East Berlin in 1988, described it as an authoritative compendium of Marxism: "In the unity of philosophical, economic, and socialist theories", it reflects "the general structure and internal logic of the scientific worldview of the working class".<sup>6</sup>

However, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Georg Lukács took a decidedly opposed position to Lenin's claims that the common "views" of Marx and Engels were "most clearly and fully expounded"<sup>7</sup> in the latter's *Anti-Dühring* and in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888). Lukács argues there that Engels fell short of Marx's understanding of social practice in the "Theses on Feuerbach"<sup>8</sup>: Marx had stated that the "chief defect of all previous existing materialism" was its conceiving "reality ... only in the form of the object" and not as "human sensuous activity, practice" (*MECW* 5, 4). In his own *Feuerbach* text, Engels cited the fact that "we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural phenomenon by bringing it about ourselves, producing it out of its conditions", as a decisive argument against sceptical doubt concerning an "exhaustive cognition" of the world (*MECW* 26, 367).

Lukács infers from the key role that Engels attributes to modern experimental natural science, and to its technical applications in our cognition of the world, that Engels conceives society as a domain of reality pervaded by causal laws that social technologists can harness and control. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács regards this as a naturalistic reduction of the concept of social practice, and thus as a relapse into the older materialism criticized by Marx in his "Theses on Feuerbach", that is, a materialism that conceives of reality under the form of the object.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation of Engels, which Lukács revised in the 1967 preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness*,<sup>10</sup> is at first glance supported by the publication of Engels's *Nachlaß* manuscript on the *Dialectics of Nature* (1925). Lukács's view was also subsequently propagated by well-known western authors after the Second World War. According to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the later Engels advocates a monism that levels the categorical difference between nature and society, and, by recourse to natural laws, wants to "steer" "human history from the outside".<sup>11</sup>

And in his much-respected book *Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Marx* [*The Concept of Nature in Marx*] (1962), Alfred Schmidt

agrees with the view that Engels failed to attain the intellectual level of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach". The philosophy of Engels's later years, Schmidt claims, falls foul of the "verdict" by which he had declared the materialism of the eighteenth century to be obsolete in his "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy" (1844): it "merely posited Nature instead of the Christian God as the Absolute confronting Man" (*MECW* 3, 419).<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Landgrebe speaks of a "degeneration" of Marxist theories or theoretical approaches in Engels: the latter conceives of human history as a "mechanical development" that paved the way for the "dogmatic consolidation of the Marxist position" in Lenin and his followers.<sup>13</sup> Albrecht Wellmer makes the same allegation of a "naturalization of history".<sup>14</sup>

On this line of reception, Engels's self-declared task of "present[ing] our opinions in the periodical press" (*MECW* 26, 427), and of drawing in non-academic readers, is taken as a sign that he had little sense of the subtleties of Marx' theoretical achievements. Engels's popularization of these in his later publications supposedly exalted the natural sciences because of his naïve conformity to the *Zeitgeist* and thus abetted the ideological function of "Marxism" in "actually existing socialist" states.

### *Elbe's and Salzborn's Critique of Engels*

Ingo Elbe claims there are three points of connection for an "ideologized and restricted reception of Marx" in Engels's work: (1) the reduction of the concept of social practice to the "experimental activity in the natural sciences"—this accords with Lukács's influential, but later revised, critique of Engels in *History and Class-Consciousness*; (2) the "historicist interpretation" of Marx's *Capital*; which Elbe, drawing upon the interpretation in the "new Marx-reading" (including Helmut Reichelt, Hans Georg Backhaus, Michael Heinrich, among others), but giving it a polemical and pointed expression, reckons to be a serious misunderstanding; (3) an inadequate theory of the state which applies a "personal definition of class rule acquired from pre-capitalist forms of society" to the bourgeois state and thus fails to sufficiently account for anonymous forms of power.<sup>15</sup> This theory, however, was fertile ground for Lenin's concept of the state, which he used to justify the Bolsheviks' repressive rule after the October revolution.<sup>16</sup>

On point (1) Elbe vacillates between two different positions in justifying the allegation of a naturalistic reduction of the concept of practice

in Engels. He puts forward a radical critique with the claim that Engels was closely attached to the scientism of his times and therefore shifted “the emphasis from a theory of social practice to a contemplative-reflective theory of development that paved the way for a mechanistic and fatalistic conception of historical materialism”.<sup>17</sup> Elbe thus reiterates—but without mentioning his name—Lukács’s position in *History and Class Consciousness* which had claimed that the prominence that Engels ascribes to natural-scientific experiments, for our cognition of the world, reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the Marxist concept of social practice, because experimentation is “the most purely contemplative comportment”.<sup>18</sup> Lukács corrects this interpretation of Engels in the 1967 forward to *History and Class Consciousness* when he notes that modern experimental natural science in no way merely observes the phenomena of nature but systematically produces experimental conditions, with the goal of investigating technically applicable causal relations. The knowledge and control yielded by this can lead human beings out of their powerlessness in the face of nature, and this itself—according to Lukács in 1967—is a form of social practice.<sup>19</sup>

Elbe implicitly draws close to Lukács’s self-correction in the 1967 foreword by relativizing his claim that Engels provided the impetus for a “mechanistic and fatalistic conception of historical materialism” by indicating “ambivalences and practical-philosophical motives” in the latter’s *Feuerbach* text, in *Anti-Dühring*, and in his later letters.<sup>20</sup> In the passage in *Anti-Dühring* which Elbe refers to, Engels describes the projected socialist society as follows:

The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organisation ... The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history. (*MECW* 25, 270)

What Elbe sees as the “ambivalences” in Engels’s late work emerges from his approving rendition of Charles Taylor’s thesis that “Marxist-Leninism” had united “incompatibles”, “an extreme voluntarism ... with the most thoroughgoing determinism”. Taylor considers the leading socialists’ project of planning and directing future society as extreme

voluntarism, and he sees the conviction that this can only happen, through insight into the causal laws that permeate social reality, as an extreme determinism. Elbe traces the “paradox of connecting voluntarism and determinism” in “Marxist-Leninism” back to a half-baked amalgamation of the inclination towards a naturalistic reduction of the concept of practice with genuinely practical-philosophical motives in Engels’s late work.

While Elbe wants to corroborate his thesis that “Marxism” is really an “Engels-ism”,<sup>21</sup> Taylor locates the “error”, as he deems the entanglement of voluntarism and determinism, already in Marx.<sup>22</sup> The above-cited passage from *Anti-Dühring* picks up Marx’s central statement about the course of history in general in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (*MECW* 11, 103). Engels gives this phrase a fresh twist by distinguishing future socialist society from all previous ones: there human beings will first be able to “make” their “own history” “with full consciousness” on the basis of the knowledge and control of the “laws of [their] own social action” (*MECW* 25, 270).

The parallel that Engels draws between these laws and natural laws is prefigured in Marx. In the afterwards to the second edition of *Capital* (1873), Marx cites approvingly the claim of a Russian reviewer that he viewed “the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence” (*MECW* 35, 18). Jürgen Habermas takes this as evidence that Marx “does not distinguish between the logical status of the natural sciences and critique”, that is, critical social theory.<sup>23</sup> This is akin to Taylor’s view that the amalgamation of voluntarism and determinism in “Marxist-Leninism” has its origin in Marx himself.

Elbe characterizes the statement that Engels is the *sole* author of the “ideological and restricted reception of Marx” in Marxist-Leninism as erroneous. This reception should “rather be conceived as the elaboration, systematization, and foregrounding of the ideological content in Marx’s work—within the framework of [its] reception by Engels and the epigones”.<sup>24</sup> Yet if the root of the ideological content of “Marxist-Leninism” is already to be sought in Marx, then we can no longer call this “Engels-ism”—which Elbe nonetheless does. Thus an inconsistency

in his argument comes to the fore in his vacillation between a catchy and a nuanced critique of Engels. In what follows, I will show that there are also incoherencies in his assessment of Engels's reading of Marx's *Capital* and in his understanding of the state.

Regarding (2), the “new Marx reading” that emerged in the 1960s in and around Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer corrected the previously prevailing conviction about the pathbreaking significance of Engels's commentaries on Marx's critique of political economy. In his review of Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Engels pointed out its methodological proximity to Hegel's *Logic*, and he ties this to the thesis that Marx's “logical” reconstruction of economic categories is a “reflection” of the historical genesis of these categories, but purged of “interfering contingencies” (*MECW* 16, 475). On this reading, a real historical process corresponds to the thinking in Marx's critique that runs from the category of the exchange value of goods through the concept of money and on to capital.

Engels adheres to this interpretation in his “Supplement” to Volume III of Marx's *Capital* (1894), which he compiled from the *Nachlaß* manuscripts and also partly edited independently. According to Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, the exchange value of a commodity is determined by the labour-power that must be expended as labour-time in order to offer the commodity to interested parties (*MECW* 29, 277, 308, 320).<sup>25</sup> We read in Engels's “Supplement” to *Capital*, Volume III, that during the “whole period of peasant natural economy”, goods were exchanged for equivalents whose production required the same expenditure of time and energy (*MECW* 37, 885).

Engels presents a logical reconstruction of the historical transition, from a natural economy to price-determined commodity-exchange, (*MECW* 37, 884) in the foundational function of exchange-value for the concept of money as the general equivalent within useful goods in Marx's critique of political economy (*MECW* 35, 80–81).

Helmut Reichelt points out that Engels's historicist interpretation of Marx's logical method is irreconcilable with the programmatic statement, in the posthumously published draft “Introduction” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), that it would be “inexpedient and wrong to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they played the determining role in history” (*MECW* 28, 44).<sup>26</sup> Marx counts the concept of exchange value, which he adopted from classical political economy, among the “objective forms of thought”