

## Friedrich Engels (1820-95)

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### Biography

Until the 1970s the most influential framework for understanding Marx's career and ideas was the one established by Engels. This framework was crucially related to his understanding of philosophy and its supposed culmination in Hegel's systematic and all-encompassing idealism.

Engels claimed that Marx had grounded Hegel's insights in a materialism that was coincident with the physical and natural sciences of his day, and that Marx had identified a dialectical method applicable to nature, history and thought. With respect to history, Marx was said to have formed a 'materialist conception', from which his analysis of capitalist society and its 'secret' of surplus value were derived. Together these intellectual features were the core of the 'scientific socialism' which, Engels argued, should form the theory, and inform the practice, of the worldwide socialist or communist movement. This was to abolish the poverty and exploitation necessarily engendered, he claimed, by modern industrial production.

Philosophically the tenets of dialectical and historical materialism have been defended and modified by orthodox communists and non-party Marxists, and expounded and criticized by political and intellectual opponents. The three laws of dialectics, and the doctrine that history is determined by material factors in the last instance, have been attacked as tautologous and indeterminate. Engels's view that scientific socialism is a defensible representation of Marx's project has also been challenged by textual scholars and historians.

### 1. Life and works

Engels rightly described himself as an 'autodidact in philosophy', and neither planned nor realized a career as a philosopher in his lifetime. Yet his works represent the founding texts of Marxism and of Marxist philosophy, in that they set an authoritative context through which to interpret the ideas of Karl Marx in a specifically philosophical way.

Born into a wealthy Rhineland family, and growing up amidst the disruption of rapid industrialization, the teenage Friedrich embarked on a paradoxical career. All his life he was reluctantly associated with the family's business interests, though politically he sympathized with the plight of the industrial working classes. Pursuing his political interests as a revolutionary populist required him to address intellectual elites and doctrinaires, particularly those within the burgeoning socialist movement and tiny communist parties. Yet the issues addressed in those works became ever more rarified and philosophical, despite the scorn that he always evinced for 'mere' philosophers and dabbling cranks, and his enthusiasm for political action.

Most paradoxically of all, Engels pronounced himself 'junior partner' to Marx, yet for many years the only way to identify, explicate and defend the *philosophical* content of Marx's work

was through Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft (Anti-Dühring), Socialisme utopique et socialisme scientifique (Socialism: Utopian and Scientific) and Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie (Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy), all written by Engels and published under his name alone. The claim that those works represent the views of Marx rests on retrospective textual exegesis, theories of ‘partnership’ and ‘division of labour’ between the two, and negative ‘evidence’ that Marx, who was Engels’s economic dependent from the 1850s until his death in 1883, had opportunities to repudiate what Engels was saying. Engels himself contributed to this narrative, establishing his own works as the authoritative interpretation of Marx. Hence his self-description as ‘second fiddle’ is in reality somewhat paradoxical.

Bizarrely, Engels is also given credit for ‘assuming paternity’ for the illegitimate son of the Marx family’s housemaid, supposedly to save Marx embarrassment and his wife the scandal. But the documentary evidence for this tale is highly suspect, and the view that paternity of this child was an issue for anyone at all before the 1960s, when the story first surfaced, rests on reading this lurid narrative back into the ambiguities of contemporary correspondence (Carver 1989: 162–71).

Engels had the image of a lifelong bachelor in public and a discreet bohemian in private, and his successive liaisons with the working-class Burns sisters (Mary and ‘Lizzie’) are well attested. Yet they now seem to fit all too easily into the nineteenth-century pattern wherein bourgeois males could ‘keep’ women of an inferior class in the suburbs or employ them in a respectable function as housekeeper, whilst presuming in every way on their economic dependence. Engels married ‘Lizzie’ only when it was clear that she was dying and could not be Mrs/Frau Engels in his Anglo-German milieu, nor survive him as a claimant on his estate. These liaisons were childless, and it is likely that both women were lifelong illiterates, or nearly so.

Engels himself was an accomplished writer from his early twenties in German and English, fluent in French, and later a student and correspondent in numerous other languages. His library and papers, including the collection of manuscripts and other materials inherited from Marx, represented an important intellectual resource for the socialist and communist movement from his death until the dissolution of Soviet-style communism in the 1980s, not least the notebooks posthumously published as *Dialektik der Natur* (The Dialectics of Nature), from which an ‘official’ philosophy of science was derived (see Dialectical materialism).

## **2. Political theory**

By the time he was nineteen, Engels’s intellectual and political interests had moved from a heady combination of revolutionary liberalism and romantic nationalism to the Young Hegelian perspective then current in the universities, though he was never officially able to be a student. From a twentieth-century perspective this movement seems an intellectual cabal, but Engels’s apprehension of these debates was overwhelmingly political. In a regime where politics itself was almost wholly an illegitimate activity, any form of criticism was by definition subversion and inevitably confined to a small circle of writers, publishers and readers.

Engels can be distinguished from others in the school by his unusual interest in modern technology and applied sciences, and in his preoccupation with the industrial working classes, existing and prospective. Within a short time he was contributing to the *Rheinische Zeitung*, most notably on the social science of political economy, as yet little appreciated in Germany, and on attempts to discern its place within Hegel's overall system. Thus Engels first met the earnest Dr Marx and the communist Moses Hess on a brief visit to the editorial collective at Cologne in 1842, whilst *en route* to a further posting with the family manufactures at Manchester.

In England Engels wrote in both German and English on 'the social question' and the politics of class conflict, giving particular attention to socialism or communism (the terms were largely indistinguishable then). This was conceived as a system of cooperative ownership of productive resources and an egalitarian, non-monetary system of distribution applicable to society at large, combined with institutions for democratic decision-making. Engels's *Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie* (Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy) argued that a developing rationality in history could be discerned in both economic theory and practice. Applying a Hegelian dialectic of successive negations to the concepts 'free trade' and 'competition', he derived the necessity of worsening economic crises as his result, and the tenets of communism and the politics of class struggle as a resolution. Moreover in *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (The Condition of the Working Class in England) he produced an impassioned documentary and eyewitness survey of proletarian poverty and exploitation in modern industry.

On his return to Germany in 1844 Engels continued his career as a political agitator and socialist pamphleteer, this time in particular association with Marx, and the two produced three collaborative works: *Die heilige Familie* (The Holy Family) (by Engels and Marx, though with separately signed chapters), the manuscript *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology) (posthumously published as the work of Marx and Engels), and their joint, though unsigned, masterpiece *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (Manifesto of the Communist Party).

During the revolutionary events of 1848–9 Engels assisted Marx, who had assumed editorship of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne. Although Engels took advantage of the need to flee political repression from resurgent monarchists by making a walking tour through Burgundy in the autumn of 1848, he also saw active service in the spring of 1849 as liberal insurgents retreated in a more or less orderly way to the Swiss border. Making his way to England, Engels settled gradually but firmly into a life away from Germany, from partisan politics in either country, and from direct engagement with economic theory or social conditions, other than through a role, largely self-assumed, as publicist, popularizer and eventually editor for Marx.

### **3. Scientific socialism**

Philosophically, Engels's distinctive contributions were the terms 'materialist conception of history' and the 'laws of dialectics', which were assigned to Marx but explicated in various reviews, letters, introductions and texts. The assignment of these terms to Marx is itself questionable, and the explications by Engels are neither as full nor as tightly written as his reputation suggests.

Marx formulated and employed an ‘outlook’, occasionally self-identified as ‘materialist’ (in opposition to both idealism and ‘traditional’ materialism), and used terms such as ‘science’, ‘law’ and ‘dialectic’ in his works (though much more rarely than most commentaries suggest). But it was Engels who insisted that Marx’s presuppositions included a matter–consciousness dichotomy, that his works were part of a system of Hegelian proportions, that his politically engaged social science was inclusive of the natural sciences of the day (including Darwinian biology as well as physical chemistry), and that a methodology derived from Hegel’s presumed ‘dialectic’ was crucial for Marx and for understanding his achievements.

In Engels’s commentaries, Marx’s ‘materialist conception of history’ included both the quoted view that ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general’, and the gloss that ‘political action and its results originated in material causes’. Thus Marx’s ‘guiding thread’ was said to be the ‘great law of motion in history’, but in Engels’s version it emerged with a further layer of philosophical ambiguity. Engels’s qualifications – that ‘the production and reproduction of real life’ is the ‘ultimately’, but not the only, ‘determining element’ in history – could never allay the additional difficulties that he imposed on what were already problematic, and arguably for Marx, quite marginal formulations.

The ‘laws of dialectics’ assigned to Marx were formulated by Engels as reworkings of Hegel’s insights into a modern ‘science of interconnections, in contrast to metaphysics’. He suggested three: ‘transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa’, ‘interpenetration of opposites’ and ‘negation of the negation’. He described these as causal and invariable laws of motion forcing their way through the innumerable changes that can be observed in natural phenomena, human history, and ‘thought’ or logic, and maintained that they were validated by deduction. The circularity of such observations and the tautologous character of such laws were not apparent to Engels, and his more extravagant claims to link those ideas to a Marxian ‘system’ were not in fact published until after Marx’s death (Carver 1983: 129–41).

Engels’s ‘scientific socialism’ grounded the intellectual wing of the socialist and communist movement firmly in German philosophy, which he presumed had culminated in Hegel. The overarching project of his life was to link the world of progressive politics with the truths that he believed could be discerned from a philosophical system spanning the material, social and conceptual worlds, conceived developmentally. Among those truths, he alleged, was Marx’s concept of ‘surplus value’. This and other truths identified by Marx were said by Engels to be critical elements in a revolutionary political strategy. But Engels was not himself expert at the practicalities of getting from philosophical ideas to political action, nor was his philosophy capable of generating a concept of human agency that was philosophically defensible or politically useful.

### **List of works**

Engels, F. (1844) *Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie*, trans. M. Milligan, *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, vol. 3, 418–443.

(Pioneering attempt to subject political economy to philosophical analysis.)

Engels, F. (1845) *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, trans. F. Kelly-Wischniewestzky, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, vol. 4, 295–583.

(A survey, still very readable, of the horrors of early nineteenth-century industrialization.)

Engels, F. (1878–9) *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*, trans. E. Burns, *Anti-Dühring*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987, vol. 25, 5–309.

(Polemical work incorporating Engels's influential interpretation and defence of Marx.)

Engels, F. (1880) *Socialisme utopique et socialisme scientifique*, trans. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, 375–428.

(Three chapters of *Anti-Dühring* revised, published as a pamphlet and very widely translated and circulated.)

Engels, F. (1884) *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, trans. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, 449–583.

(Engels's attempt to account for the origin of women's oppression and the evolution of private property in prehistory by using a social Darwinian theory of sexual selection as well as gendered explanations of economic development.)

Engels, F. (1886) *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*, trans. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, 584–622.

(First published as a review, this is a history of German philosophy, placing Marx's materialism at its culmination and identifying it as an inversion of Hegelian idealism and arguing its coincidence with natural science.)

Engels, F. (1925) *Dialektik der Natur*, trans. C. Dutt, *The Dialectics of Nature*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987, vol. 25, 311–588.

(Notes comprising a philosophical analysis of the subject matter and methods of nineteenth-century natural science, including the 'laws of dialectics'.)

Engels, F. and Marx, K. (1845) *Die heilige Familie*, trans. R. Dixon and C. Dutt, *The Holy Family*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, vol. 4, 5–209.

(An attack on romantic, utopian and philosophical socialists of the 1840s, but incorporating interesting early formulations of Marx's 'outlook'.)

Engels, F. and Marx, K. (1932) *Die deutsche Ideologie*, trans. W. Lough, *The German Ideology*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 5, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, 19–581.

(Foundational manuscript, still not accessible in a properly edited version, nor adequately interpreted yet as an integrated work, but essential reading as an important exposition of Marx's 'outlook' in Part One.)

Engels, F. and Marx, K. (1848) Manifest der kommunistischen Partei, trans. S. Moore, Manifesto of the Communist Party, in K. Marx and F. Engels, Collected Works, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, vol. 6, 477–519.

(Still the best introduction to Marx's 'outlook', particularly the centrality of class struggle, and innocent of Engels's later interpretive framework, save in the footnotes.)

### **References and further reading**

Arthur, C. J. (1996) Engels Today: A Centenary Appreciation, London: Macmillan.

(Collection of original articles covering aspects of Engel's work that are currently of interest.)

Carver, T. (1983) Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

(A detailed textual study of similarities and differences between the works of the two men.)

Carver, T. (1989) Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

(Intellectual biography focusing on Engels's career before he met Marx, and including a detailed guide to further reading.)

Henderson, W.O. (1976) The Life of Friedrich Engels, London: Frank Cass, 2 vols.

(Valuable for factual detail.)

Mayer, G. (1934) Friedrich Engels, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 2 vols; repr. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971.

(Inspirational but out of date and somewhat uncritical 'classic' biography in German.)

Rubel, M. (1981) 'The "Marx Legend", or Engels, Founder of Marxism', in Rubel on Marx, ed. Joseph O'Malley and Keith Algozin, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 15–25.

(Courageous paper dating from 1970 questioning Engels's own account of his role vis-à-vis Marx, and thus casting doubt on all 'standard' accounts of Marxism.)

Stedman Jones, G. (1973) 'Engels and the End of Classical German Philosophy', New Left Review 79: 17–36.

(Brief but promising inquiry into Engels's appropriation of idealist philosophy.)

Stedman Jones, G. (1977) 'Engels and the Genesis of Marxism', New Left Review 106: 79–104.

(Brief but detailed study of Engels's framework for interpreting Marx.)

Steger, M and Carver, T. (1997) Engels after Marx, College Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.

(Collection of original articles covering 'identity', 'philosophy', 'politics' and 'legacy'.)

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