

Friedrich Engels and his Contribution to Marxism

Human Geography

00(0) 1–4

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1942778620937123

journals.sagepub.com/home/hug



Stavros Mavroudeas¹

Abstract

The 200th anniversary of the birth of F. Engels comes at a time when his contribution to Marxism is being disputed by Neue Lektüre and Sraffian authors, based on the alleged discovery of him having distorted *Capital*. The evidence presented by the new anti-Engelsionists is flimsy and essentially philological hair-splitting arguments. The common ground uniting them is their abhorrence for the existence of Marxism as a coherent theoretical tradition and as a weapon for the revolutionary struggle of the working class for the emancipation of human society.

Keywords

capital, Engels, Marx, Marxism, MEGA, Neue Lektüre, political economy

A short biography

This year (2020) marks the anniversary of 200 years since the birth of Friedrich Engels, the co-founder of the Marxist tradition. He was born on the 28 November 1820 at Barmen-Elberfeld (later renamed Wuppertal) in Germany. He came from a bourgeois family with industrial and merchant enterprises in Germany and England. At the age of 20 he followed the radicalization of the German student youth of that time and joined the so-called Young Hegelians. The Young Hegelians were a radical group that disputed social conformism and supported democracy and anti-clericalism. German student youth – coming mainly from bourgeois origins as the university was still an upper-class fiefdom – were profoundly disillusioned by the failure of the bourgeois democratic revolutions in the then segmented Germany. These revolutions that strived for a unified democratic society were initiated by the bourgeoisie but fought for by the peasants and the workers. Once they were crushed by foreign interventions, the bourgeoisie soon compromised and the popular classes remained to fight till the bitter end. This led a sizeable segment of the student youth to dispute the social progressiveness of the bourgeoisie and to seek the emancipator of the human society in the less-knowledgeable but more steadfast popular classes. This was indeed the course followed by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.

Engels met Marx in 1842 but their lifelong friendship and scientific and political collaboration began in 1844. He had become a communist before Marx, with the latter following soon afterwards. They co-authored in 1847 the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* which delineated the strategy and the

tactics of the communists on the eve of the democratic revolutions in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. He participated in the 1849 revolutionary uprisings in Germany and fought with one of the best revolutionary military detachments. This experience earned him the nickname ‘the General’ among his and Marx’s circle.

After the failure of these revolts Engels returned in 1850 to Manchester to work for the family textile enterprise and leading a literally double-life: on the one side as a factory manager and on the other hand as a social revolutionary fighting against his very class. At the same time Marx, after several expulsions from other European countries, settled in London and their collaboration intensified. During the 1849 revolutions (when Engels participated militarily in them and Marx took the role of the political spokesperson), a very neat division of labour existed between them. Engels was primarily occupied with garnering political support while Marx concentrated on theoretical analysis. Nonetheless, as it will be argued below, this does not diminish Engels’ theoretical stature as he actively participated in the formation of Marxist theory by his own contributions, his co-authored works with Marx and, above all, his immense knowledge of the actual workings of the capitalist economy. When Engels eventually

¹Department of Social Policy, Panteion University, Athens, Greece

Corresponding Author:

Stavros Mavroudeas, Department of Social Policy, Panteion University, 136 A. Syggrou Ave., Athens 17671, Greece.

Email: s.mavroudeas@panteion.gr

retired in 1870, he moved near Marx in London and their collaboration intensified further.

When Marx died in 1883, Engels undertook the Herculean feat of editing Marx's unpublished work and particularly the second and third volumes of *Capital*. He, moreover, worked energetically for the promotion of Marxist theory in tandem with the creation of workers' revolutionary parties. This exemplified his shared conviction with Marx – later expounded by Lenin – that there cannot be a revolutionary party without a revolutionary theory and programme. Engels died in 1895 having made an immense contribution in developing, expanding and systematizing the Marxist tradition. For this, he is rightfully respected as the co-founder of Marxism.

Engels' contribution to Marxist political economy

Engels' theoretical contributions span several fields. However, it is worth highlighting his work in political economy that is often neglected; and this sometimes goes hand-in-hand with some recent gratuitous attacks on his editorship of Marx's *Capital*. This is a totally erroneous conception. Engels was not only a profound connoisseur of the actual workings of the capitalist economy but also a talented economist.

He wrote *The Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* which greatly impressed Marx and motivated him to study political economy. In this, he offers a critical analysis of the value theory of classical political economy and pinpoints several of its deficiencies (e.g. Ricardo's setting of the market price according to the least efficient producer). He also endeavours in several other crucial issues like the existence of economic cycles and capitalism's inherent tendency through labour-saving technical change towards creating a surplus population (what later Marx termed the 'reserve army of labor'). Additionally, he recognizes the tendency towards concentration and centralization of capital as well as the role of market speculation. Last, Engels analyses the inefficient character of the capitalist economy and the superiority of a planned economy.

His *Condition of the Working Class in England* – written in 1844 before the beginning of his collaboration with Marx in 1845 – explores several crucial issues that later constituted the backbone of Marxist labour economics. He studies the labour market and the determination of wage and unemployment (again through the process of the reserve army of labour), the industrialization process and the consequences of technical change. A major Engelsian contribution is his recognition that labour's class struggle through trade unions has viable results and leads to sustainable better wages and working conditions. This argument pioneers the Marxist wage theory as constituted by a physical and a social part and its radical difference from Ricardo's conception of the wage as necessarily confined to the

physical part (through the doomed Malthusian theory of population). This theme is echoed in his later (1872) *Housing Question*, where he again stressed the social determination of the value of labor-power.

But Engels' study on the *Housing Question* goes further beyond and explores meticulously hot topics of geography in general (and economic geography in particular). He analyses how the problem of working class' housing arises in capitalism and how the latter exploits it but never actually solves it by geographically moving the problem around.

Engels' *Anti-Duhring* (1873) devotes a whole section on political economy where he analyses scientific methodology, the theory of surplus-value and the theory of rent. He rightfully emphasizes that the theory of surplus-value (and of course the underlying Labour Theory of Value [LTV]) and the law of falling rate of profit to fall (LFRP) constitute the basic tenets of Marxist economic analysis and its primary differentiae specificaе from classical political economy.¹ A usually neglected gem in Engels' political economy contribution is his focus on the effect of the turnover of capital in relation to profitability. The turnover of capital is the time required for profits to be reaped from an investment. A shorter turnover of capital enables capital to reinvest more rapidly and thus increase its annual profitability. Engels, based on his own knowledge of capitalist enterprises, pinpoints that it is a counter-acting factor in the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, an issue remaining till today unexplored in Marxist economic analysis.

Notwithstanding, Engels' major contribution in Marxist political economy is his unmitigated feat in streamlining Marx's notebooks into the second and third volumes of *Capital*. This required not a scholastic philological editor but a very accomplished political economist with profound knowledge of the issues at hand. Engels was able to succeed in this not only because he had this quality but also because he was 'flesh and blood' of Marx's thinking. Marx's economic analysis would not be so powerful without the very close interaction and interweaving with Engels' intimate knowledge of capitalism's *modus operandi* and strong economic analysis abilities.

On some gratuitous attempts to counterpose Engels to Marx

Frequently Engels was attacked as a distorter of Marx's thought. The common ground behind almost all these attacks is the fact that Engels made Marxism a political and intellectual force by systematizing it and also by organizing and directing political parties based on Marxism. This brought the wrath of many foes but also of several dubious 'friends' that prefer Marxism to be an amorphous 'critical' approach without political intervention.

Some initial attacks took place immediately after the publication of *Capital* and the energetic promotion of Marxism by Engels.

The first serious attacks were unleashed in the 1970s and 1980s and focused on philosophical and methodological issues. Engels was falsely accused of misrepresenting Marx's dialectics as a mechanistically objective method and of trying to imprison Marx's free critical spirit in the cage of a standardized 'system' (e.g. Carver, 1984; McLellan, 1977). This attack had sometimes an ultra-leftist allure as it pronounced the supposed indeterminacy of class struggle as opposed to strict laws of motion. In the ensuing debate it was proven that, despite minor differences, Engels was consonant with Marx. Foster (2017) and Blackledge (2020) give an accurate presentation of this wave and also a brilliant reply to it.

The second wave of attacks emerged since the 1990s and centred more on the political economy of Marx and Engels. It is led by the Neue Lektüre² (NL) authors and their hijacking of the MEGA project and it is being seconded by Sraffians. It maintained that Engels distorted *Capital* by making unwarranted interventions and mispresenting it as a finished work whereas it is simply an incomplete research project. Among others, Engels is accused of ascribing to Marx a theory of economic crisis based on the law of the falling rate of profit, whereas the latter was supposedly agnostic.

Their main attack is on *Capital III*, although the whole *Capital* also draws their fire. They cannot accuse Engels of falsifying *Capital I* as this was published while Marx was alive. However, much of their accursed subjects (LTV for the Sraffians, and the theory of money and the LFRP for both of them) are already clearly delineated in *Capital I*. Hence, their main effort is to draw a wedge between *Capital I* and *Capital III*, by arguing that Marx had second thoughts on these issues and Engels hid them while editing *Capital III*.

M. Heinrich, a prominent NL spokesperson, maintains that Engels' editorship distorted Marx's text by presenting it as a coherent work whereas it was not only an unfinished but also an unfinishable work: Marx's thought was 'far more ambivalent and much less developed' and 'it is doubtful whether the materials were available to complete *Capital*'. He even implies bad intentions, by maintaining that Engels 'by no means indicated all the interpolations and alterations he made' in *Capital III* (Heinrich, 1996-7). His alleged proofs of Engels' 'crimes' are based on Vollgraf and Jungnickel (2002). A careful examination of their proofs shows that they are insubstantial and simply hair-splitting arguments. Vygotskii and Naron (2002) have very accurately criticized them for not comprehending the historical character *Capital III* and for inordinately putting themselves in Engels' boots as *Capital's* 'modern' editors.

In analytical matters, his main focus is on crisis theory. Heinrich (2016: 127) boldly declares that after 1865 'Although Marx made no more explicit reference to the "law

of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall," a strong indication suggests that Marx no longer adhered to this law'. The textual evidence he offers is irrelevant as he is totally ignorant of the distinction and the relationship between the value composition of capital (VCC), the technical composition of capital and the organic composition of capital (OCC; see Saad-Filho, 1993). Thus, he refers to a passage where Marx argues that there can be an increased VCC with an increased profit rate. But Marx's LFRP rests upon the OCC and not the VCC.

The next analytical point he tackles in Heinrich (1996) is credit theory where he declares that he discovered obvious evidence of Engelsian manipulation of Marx's work. He argues that Marx has opted for not discussing credit theory at the highly abstract level of *Capital*, but at a lower level linked to a number of historically specific institutional factors. He even declares that for Marx 'there cannot be a general credit theory'. He then accuses Engels for presenting the research material found in Marx's manuscript on the general level. This is a totally imprudent argument. First, the analysis of credit is part and parcel of the theory of money. And Marx's theory of money is an organic part of the analysis of *Capital*. Second, Marx's analysis proceeds from the abstract to the concrete. Consequently, his analysis of credit follows the same route and cannot be relegated to some middle-range level.

Heinrich's (2016) additional 'proofs' are also red herrings. He submerges into Marx's correspondence but the best he can discover is that Marx was testing his crisis theory by examining several concrete empirical cases. Therefore, the rest of his attack on Engels for falsifying Marx is simply erroneous.

The only point that Heinrich makes a serious substantive argument is his critique of Engels' historical transformation problem (and the existence of simple commodity production as a system per se). This is a well-known error of Engels for which, however, he took the full responsibility. Thus, he cannot be accused as a falsifier of Marx on this count.

The Sraffians have jumped onto the NL bandwagon. Their perspective is not so much textual scholasticism but economic analysis. The controversy between Marxism and Sraffianism is well known and centres upon the Sraffian rejection of the LTV and the LFRP. Kurz (2018), an eminent figure of Sraffianism, praised the MEGA edition for presenting Marx as a 'renaissance man and homo universalis' rather than as a political activist. He accuses Engels that 'He was not, at least not throughout, the innocent editor as which he portrayed himself, although there is reason to presume that he felt he was'. He laments that MEGA did not find any wavering by Marx regarding the LTV. But Kurz (2018: 16-17) finds a true watershed regarding the LFRP. He readily espouses all NL claims about Marx having second thoughts about the LFRP. And, of course, that Engels consciously concealed this. His conclusions are revealingly political. From MEGA's debunking of Marxism as a system he

concludes that Marx had reservations about the inevitability of socialism (Kurz (2018: 23).

In praise of Engels, co-founder of Marxism

The attacks on Engels are neither justified nor bona fide.

For the anti-Engelsionists that try to place themselves as the true interpreters of Marx's thought, history leaves no room for them. Marx and Engels' close personal relationship, common way of thinking and division of labour (both theoretical and political) are beyond any dispute. Marx regularly discussed economic matters with Engels. Furthermore, no modern editors could achieve transforming Marx's manuscripts to a book as they lack their close personal relation and their long-standing identification in theoretical and political matters.

The main reason why Engels has attracted so much rancour is that he systematized Marxism as theoretical system and transformed it to a mass political movement. This is his 'cardinal sin' and for this contemporary anti-Engelsionists practically prefer that *Capital* should not have been published: 'it is an unfinished and unfinishable work'. For this reason, they try to portray Marx as a 'liberal thinker' (Carver, 1984) as opposed to the devious communist Engels. It is true that Engels became a communist before Marx. But it is equally true that Marx and Engels are the co-founders of Marxism and the communist movement.³ Their bond cannot be severed despite the copious efforts of the anti-Engelsionists.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. As it is well known, the Marxist LTV has been habitually attacked by many friends and foes of Marxism: beginning with Bohm-Bawerk, continuing with the Sraffians and nowadays with D. Harvey (who recently professed that Marx had no 'Labor' theory of value). The gist of these attacks is that on the basis of LTV Marxism proves that capitalism is an exploitative system that has to be overthrown.
2. The NL proposes a new reading of Marx against the supposedly rigidity of classical Marxist theory. First, it argues that Marx

has a monetary theory of value, implying that abstract labour is directly associated and incarnated in money. This is a well-known fallacy that Marx explicitly rejected in his critique of Franklin. Second, the NL abhors considering the state as an instrument of the bourgeoisie and argues that although it supports the capitalist system it has also considerable degrees of freedom. This led the NL to relativism and reformist politics. Third, it questions the revolutionary character of the proletariat.

3. It is revealing how their co-authored founding text of the communist movement, the *Communist Manifesto*, was preceded by Engels (1847) *Principles of Communism*.

References

- Blackledge P (2020) Engels vs. Marx?: two hundred years of Frederick Engels. *Monthly Review* 72: 21–39. DOI: 10.14452/MR-072-01-2020-05_3
- Carver T (1984) Marxism as method. In: Ball T and Farr J (eds) *After Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Engels F (1847 [1969]) '*Principles of Communism*' in *Selected Works, Volume One*. Progress Publishers, Moscow, pp. 81–97.
- Foster JB (2017) The return of Engels. *Monthly Review* 68(10): 46. DOI: 10.14452/MR-068-10-2017-03_5
- Heinrich M (1996-7) 'Engels' edition of the third volume of *capital* and marx's original manuscript. *Science & Society* 60: 4.
- Heinrich M (2016) 'Capital' after MEGA: Discontinuities. *Interruptions and New Beginning*, *Crisis & Critique* 3: 3.
- Kurz HD (2018) Will the MEGA2 edition be a watershed in interpreting Marx? *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 25(5): 783–807. DOI: 10.1080/09672567.2018.1523937
- McLellan D (1977) *Frederick Engels*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Saad-Filho A (1993) A note on Marx's analysis of the composition of capital. *Capital & Class* 17(2): 127–146. DOI: 10.1177/030981689305000106
- Vollgraf C-E and Jungnickel J (2002) Marx in Marx's words'? On Engels's edition of the main manuscript of book 3 of capital. *International Journal of Political Economy* 32(1): 35–78. DOI: 10.1080/08911916.2002.11042868
- Výgodskii V and Naron S (2002) What was it actually that engels published in the years 1885 and 1894? On the article by Carl-Erich Vollgraf and Jürgen Jungnickel entitled 'marx in marx's words?'. *International Journal of Political Economy* 32(1): 79–82. DOI: 10.1080/08911916.2002.11042869

Author Biography

Stavros Mavroudeas is Professor of Political Economy at the Department of Social Policy of Panteion University.