

Engels vs. Marx?: Two Hundred Years of Frederick Engels

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At the bicentenary of his birth, Frederick Engels's reputation as an original thinker is, among Anglophone academics at least, at its nadir. The main reason for this unfortunate state of affairs is undoubtedly political. Despite the recent global economic crisis and associated increases in inequality that have tended to confirm Karl Marx and Engels's general critique of capitalism, Marxism is an optimistic doctrine that has not fared well in a context dominated by working-class retreat and demoralization.¹ But if this context has been unpropitious for Marxism generally, criticisms of Engels's thought have a second, quite separate, source. Over the course of the twentieth century, a growing number of commentators have claimed that Engels fundamentally distorted Marx's thought, and that "Marxism" and especially Stalinism emerged out of this one-sided caricature of Marx's ideas.²

While the claim that Engels distorted Marx's ideas has roots going back to the nineteenth century, 1956 was a pivotal moment after which it increasingly became a dominant theme within the secondary literature.³ When a New Left emerged in response to Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech, the Russian invasion of Hungary, and the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt, it attempted to renew socialism through a critical reassessment of Marxism. Engels's contribution to Marxism became a focal point in the ensuing debate. Though a small minority among this milieu attempted to rescue Engels's and V. I. Lenin's reputations alongside that of Marx from any association with Joseph Stalin's counterrevolution, a much larger group concluded that the experience of Stalinism damned the entire Marxist tradition all the way back to Marx. Between these two poles, a third grouping counterposed Marx's youthful "humanistic" writings to Engels's "scientific" interpretation of Marxism.⁴

Drawing on a one-sided interpretation of Georg Lukács's early critical comments on Engels's concepts of a dialectics of nature, this milieu gravitated to the view that Engels was Marx's greatest mistake. Thus, by 1961, George Lichtheim could take it for granted that whereas Marx had sought to transcend the opposition between idealism (autonomous morality) and materialism (heteronomous causation) through his concept of praxis, Engels had reduced Marxism to a positivistic form of materialism.⁵ A few years later, Donald Clark Hodges essentially endorsed the view among academics that "the young Marx has become the hero of Marx scholarship and the late Engels its villain."⁶ Similarly, in 1968, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote of, and rejected, Engelsian Marxism for its apparent conception of revolution as a quasi-neutral event. Engels, according to this critique, believed that "we must await the coming of the revolution as we await the coming of an eclipse."⁷

In what is probably the most uncharitable critique of Engels's thought, Norman Levine argues that while it is true that Marxism gave rise to Stalinism, twentieth-century Marxism is best understood as a form of "Engelsism," a bastardization of Marx's original ideas in which his sublation of idealism and materialism was reduced to a positivist, mechanical, and fatalistic caricature of the real thing. "There was," according to Levine, "a clear and steady evolution from Engels to Lenin to Stalin," and "Stalin carried this tradition of Engels and the Engelsian side of Lenin to its extreme."⁸

The rational core of the claim that Engels begat Marxism derives from the fact that Engels penned

the most influential popularization of his and Marx's ideas: the ironically titled *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*. Universally known as *Anti-Dühring*, this book played a key part in winning the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party to Marxism during the period of Otto von Bismarck's antisocialist laws.⁹ *Anti-Dühring* is also Engels's most controversial work. This is in large part because, as Hal Draper has pointed out, it is "the only more or less systematic presentation of Marxism" written by either Marx or Engels. Consequently, anyone wanting to reinterpret Marx's thought must first detach this book from his seal of approval.¹⁰ It is thus around *Anti-Dühring*, the shorter excerpt from it, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and other related works, most notably *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* and the unfinished and unpublished in his lifetime *Dialectics of Nature*, that debates about the relationship of Marx to "Engelsian" Marxism tend to turn.

In his contribution to this literature, John Holloway argues that while it would be wrong to overemphasize the differences between Marx and Engels, this is more to the detriment of the former—particularly the Marx of the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*—than it is to Engels's advantage. According to Holloway, "science, in the Engelsian tradition which became known as 'Marxism,' is understood as the exclusion of subjectivity."¹¹ If Holloway is honest enough to recognize that Marx's ideas cannot easily be unpicked from those of Engels, Paul Thomas wants to spare Marx from the criticisms of Engels: "Engels's post-Marxian doctrines owe little or nothing to the man he called his mentor."¹² According to Thomas, the "conceptual chasm separating Marx's writings from the arguments set forth in *Anti-Dühring* is such that even if Marx was familiar with these arguments, he disagreed with" Engels's view that "human beings...are in the last analysis physical objects whose motion is governed by the same general laws that regulate the motion of all matter."¹³ Terrell Carver has produced what is probably the most comprehensive version of the divergence thesis. He argues that whereas Marx saw "science as an *activity* important in technology and industry," Engels viewed "its importance for socialists in terms of a *system* of knowledge, incorporating the causal laws of physical science and taking them as a model for a covertly academic study of history, 'thought' and, somewhat implausibly, current politics."¹⁴

Like Thomas, Carver disapproves of this approach and believes it separates Engels from Marx. Carver explains Marx's indulgence toward these alien ideas in very disparaging terms: "perhaps he felt it was easier, in view of their long friendship, their role as leading socialists, and the usefulness of Engels's financial resources, to keep quiet and not interfere in Engels's work, even if it conflicted with his own."¹⁵ Unfortunately, or so Carver suggests, Marx's silence about *Anti-Dühring* and related works allowed Engels's thought to take on the mantle of orthodoxy first within the Second International before subsequently becoming "the basis of official philosophy and history in the Soviet Union."¹⁶ This was a disastrous turn of events, for Engels was either "unaware (or had he forgotten?)" that whereas *The German Ideology* had transcended the opposition between materialism and idealism, "his materialism...was close in many respects to being a simple reversal of philosophical idealism *and* a faithful reflection of natural sciences as portrayed by positivists."¹⁷ In a nutshell, Carver, Holloway, Levine, Lichtheim, and Thomas are prominent proponents of what John Green calls a "new orthodoxy" that condemns Engels for having reduced Marx's conception of revolutionary praxis to a version of the mechanical materialism and political fatalism against which he and Marx had rebelled in the 1840s.¹⁸

Superficially, at least, the claim that Engels's *Anti-Dühring* is a mechanically materialist and politically fatalist text is an odd complaint. Engels's engagement with Dühring was explicitly intended as a defense of revolutionary political practice against the latter's moralistic reformism—and no less an interventionist Marxist than Lenin described it as "a handbook for every class-conscious worker."¹⁹ More substantively, Engels's response to Dühring's criticism of Marx's

deployment of Hegelian categories as a “nonsensical analogy borrowed from the religious sphere” included a clear recapitulation of Marx’s revolution in philosophy.²⁰ Whereas Dühring claimed that Marx’s use of the term *sublation* to explain how something can be “both overcome and preserved” was an example of “Hegelian verbal jugglery,” Engels insisted that this term helped Marx synthesize the partial truths of older forms of materialism and idealism into a whole that transcended the limitations of these earlier perspectives.²¹ In fact, the claim that *Anti-Dühring* represents a fundamental break with Marx’s philosophy rests on an unconvincing caricature of Engels’s arguments.²² Moreover, the related attempt to downplay the essential unity of Marx and Engels’s thought cannot withstand critical scrutiny.

In the most detailed attempt to force a division between Marx and Engels, Carver claims that they neither spoke with one voice in “perfect agreement” nor did they embrace a simple division of labor such that obvious differences between their two voices can be dismissed as natural consequences of their engagements with different subject matters.²³ Carver insists that the myth of a “perfect partnership” was invented by Engels after Marx’s death to justify his own standing within the international socialist movement, and that, contra this myth, evidence for collaboration between the two friends is much less significant than is commonly supposed. He argues that Marx and Engels penned only three “major” joint works during their lifetimes, and of these *The Holy Family* included separately signed chapters while *The Communist Manifesto* was written by Marx alone after taking into consideration Engels’s earlier drafts. Finally, *The German Ideology* remained unfinished and unpublished in their lifetimes and is in fact an opaque document that obscures more than it reveals of their early relationship—Carver labels it an “apocryphal” text that, as a book, “never took place.” By contrast with the “perfect partnership” paradigm, Carver claims that it was only after Marx’s death that Engels sought to, and largely succeeded in, “revoicing Marx” in his own words.²⁴

A problem with Carver’s interpretation of the Marx-Engels relationship is signaled in Holloway’s critique of Engels’s thought noted earlier. As Holloway suggests, Marx, particularly the Marx of the 1859 preface, shared many of the assumptions that are typically associated with Engels’s supposed distortion of his thought. A comparable point, though from the opposite perspective, was made forty years ago by Sebastiano Timpanaro. He argued that “everyone who begins by representing Engels in the role of a banalizer and distorter of Marx’s thought inevitably ends by finding many of Marx’s own statements too ‘Engelsian.’”²⁵ Likewise, the best two existent studies of Engels’s work, Stephen Rigby’s *Engels and the Formation of Marxism* (1992) and Dill Hunley’s *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels* (1991) both powerfully contribute to demolishing the divergence myth, but do so by arguing that Marx shared many if not all of the flaws usually associated with Engels’s work. Rigby insists that “attempts to counterpose the views of Marx and Engels are essentially a strategy to forestall a confrontation with the problems which lie within Marx’s works themselves.”²⁶ Meanwhile, Hunley concludes that “in most respects the two men fundamentally agreed with each other” and their writings share similar contradictions between more and less powerful themes.²⁷ In effect, Rigby and to a lesser extent Hunley conclude that Engels should not be seen as the fall guy in the history of Marxism because the defects associated with his ideas are also characteristic of Marx’s thought.

Beyond the problem of the divergence thesis of the theoretical parallels between Marx’s and Engels’s works, Carver’s account of the actual extent of collaboration between Marx and Engels is difficult to square with what we know of their relationship. In the first instance, Carver’s defense of the divergence thesis depends on something of a straw person argument. Outside the quasi-religious ideologues of the old Soviet bloc, where Marx and Engels’s relationship was rather absurdly described as a “perfect whole” in which a “meeting in mind and spirit...worked together in harmony for forty years,” the “perfect agreement” thesis is uninteresting because it is obviously untrue—and Engels certainly did not make any such claim.²⁸ Any reasonable attempt to reaffirm the uniquely close bond between Marx and Engels from the 1840s until Marx’s death in 1883 in no way implies

that there were no disagreements or fallouts nor differences in tone, emphasis, and even substance across their writings over this period. Not only would it be utterly bizarre if there were no such differences, but it is possible to locate such differences internal to the works of both Marx and Engels themselves (and to the works of any other interesting thinker!).

Second, Carver is wrong to dismiss the importance of the intellectual division of labor that undoubtedly characterized Marx and Engels's relationship. It is a fact that Engels tended, as Draper points out in his superb study of Marx and Engels's politics, to handle "popularised expositions, 'party' problems, and certain subjects in which he was particularly interested or expert."²⁹ And while it is true that this division of labor between the two founders of the Marxist tradition was in no sense absolute, once properly understood, this fact actually serves to reinforce the claim of a high degree of collaboration between the two men. The extensive correspondence between them, especially in the period when Engels worked in Manchester while Marx lived in London (before and after this separation, they had much more opportunity simply to talk to each other), evidences a profound intellectual dialogue over a vast range of subjects from which both learned and through which they both honed their arguments.

Third, the division of labor between these two friends reflected the fact that Engels was the intellectually stronger of the two men in a number of areas. In the 1970s, Perry Anderson rightly challenged the already "fashionable" tendency "to depreciate the relative contribution of Engels to the creation of historical materialism" by making the "scandalous" but nonetheless valid point that "Engels's *historical* judgements are nearly always superior to those of Marx. He possessed a deeper knowledge of European history, and had a surer grasp of its successive and salient structures." Anderson was well aware of the "supremacy of Marx's overall contribution to the *general theory* of historical materialism," but was justifiably keen to distance himself from the typically crude criticisms associated with the anti-Engels literature.³⁰

Fourth, Carver's assessment of the degree of formal collaboration between Marx and Engels is simply disingenuous. Besides the three "major" works he mentions in his discussion of their supposed noncollaboration, Marx and Engels coauthored numerous important, theoretically informed political interventions throughout their lives. They also corresponded on numerous issues, and readers of their correspondence can often find Engels's influence on subsequent texts written by Marx.³¹ It is typical that one of Marx's most famous aphorisms about history repeating itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce," was borrowed from Engels, while much of the substance, for instance, of Marx's justly famous *Critique of the Gotha Programme* drew on similar arguments put forth previously by Engels.³² Indeed, once we take seriously their joint political writings alongside their voluminous correspondence, it quickly becomes obvious just how implausible is Carver's suggestion that their common project was Engels's invention.

The closest thing to hard evidence for Marx's corroboration of the divergence thesis is a jokey letter he wrote to Engels on August 1, 1856. Carver emphasizes how, in this letter, Marx complains about a journalist writing of the two of them as if they were one.³³ The writer in question was Ludwig Simon, an émigré deputy from the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848–49, who exhibited what Marx called an "exceedingly odd" tendency "to speak of us in the singular—'Marx and Engels says' etc." Now, outside of a cowritten text, this phrase is by any measure a grammatical oddity. Nonetheless, in joking about Simon's badly written "jeremiad"—Marx wrote to his old friend that he would "sooner swill soap-suds or hobnob with Zoroaster over mulled cow's piss than read through all that stuff"—Marx actually wrote of jokes that Engels had made during the revolution as if they belonged to the two of them "in the singular": "Even the jokes we cracked about Switzerland in the *Revue* 'fill him with indignation.'"³⁴

Despite Carver's claim that Marx "says nothing positive" in this letter "or elsewhere at any length

about the parameters of separation and overlap between” himself and Engels, the fact is that Marx repeatedly used the terms *us*, *our*, and *we* when referring to his political and theoretical relationship with Engels. And while his comments on this relationship may not have been written “at length,” the extant evidence overwhelmingly supports the claim that Marx believed that he and Engels had a unique intellectual and political partnership. Perhaps his most famous comment on the importance of his collaboration with Engels is to be found in his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

Frederick Engels, with whom I maintained a constant exchange of ideas by correspondence since the publication of his brilliant essay on the critique of economic categories...arrived by another road (compare his *Condition of the Working-Class in England*) at the same result as I, and when in the spring of 1845 he too came to live in Brussels, we decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience.³⁵

A year later, November 22, 1860, he reaffirmed and indeed strengthened this claim in a letter to Bertalan Szemere in which he insisted that Engels “must” be considered “my alter ego.” As to Engels’s intellectual abilities, Marx wrote to Adolf Cuss, October 18, 1853, that “being a veritable walking encyclopaedia,” Engels is “capable, drunk or sober, of working at any hour of the day or night, [he] is a fast writer and devilish QUICK in the uptake.”³⁶

For her part, Marx’s daughter Eleanor wrote that her father used to talk to Engels’s letters “as though the writer were there,” agreeing, disagreeing, and sometimes laughing “until tears ran down his cheeks.” And of their friendship she wrote, “it was one which will become as historical as that of Damon and Pythias in Greek mythology.”³⁷ Similarly, Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue reminisced that Marx “esteemed [Engels] as the most learned man in Europe” and “never tired of admiring the universality of his mind.”³⁸ In fact, contra Carver’s baseless and frankly defamatory suggestion that Marx kept quiet about his criticisms of Engels’s work because of the “usefulness of Engels’s financial resources,” it is unimaginable that anyone but “the most learned man in Europe” and, beside that, one of the greatest revolutionary activists of the age, could maintain an equal partnership with a man of Marx’s stature for some four decades. As Chris Arthur writes, attempts to downplay Engels’s influence on Marx are as unfair to Marx as they are to Engels: “Marx was never one to judge lightly the intellectual deficiencies of others, yet of all his contemporaries it was with Engels he chose to form a close intellectual partnership.”³⁹

Marx’s appreciation of the importance of his collaboration with Engels was reaffirmed in his largely forgotten book *Herr Vogt* (1860). In a comment on Engels’s *Po and Rhine*, which, Marx wrote, was published “with my agreement” and which he described as providing a “scientific”—nasty Engelsian word this—“military proof that ‘Germany does not need any part of Italy for its defence,’” he wrote that he and Engels generally “work[ed] to a common plan and after prior agreement.”⁴⁰ Despite the facts that this unambiguous statement was made in print, and that it was highlighted by Draper in *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, it tends to be ignored by those who aim to force divisions between Marx and Engels.⁴¹

Nor did Marx’s favorable comments on his collaboration with Engels end in 1860. Seventeen years later, on November 10, 1877, in a letter to Wilhelm Blos, he wrote of “Engels and I” and “us” when reviewing earlier political positions they had previously taken together.⁴² More importantly, in a letter to Adolph Sorge dated September 19, 1879—written shortly after the publication of *Anti-Dühring* and less than four years before his own death—Marx evidences the profound degree of

collaboration between him and Engels. He wrote not only of making “provision” that Engels take care of “business matters and *commissions*” while he had been away on holiday, but also of Engels writing the now famous 1879 *Circular Letter* to the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party in both of their names and in which “our point of view is plainly set forth.” Meanwhile, he wrote of “our attitude,” “our support,” “we maintain,” “Engels and I,” “our complaint,” “we differ from [Johan] Most,” “our names,” and against attempts to “rope us in” to supporting different positions with which they disagreed. All of this while praising Engels’s rebuttal, from their shared point of view, of reformist “partisans of ‘peaceable’ development.” Engels, he wrote, “showed how deep was the gulf between [Höchberg—PB] and us” by giving him a “piece of his mind.”⁴³

This letter and many others like it indicate that while it might be foolish to treat Marx and Engels in the singular, it is much more absurd to claim, as does Thomas, that “there is no evidence for any joint doctrine outside of Engels’s insistence that it was somehow—or had to be—‘there.’”⁴⁴ This is simply untrue, and Thomas’s denial of evidence from Marx for a joint doctrine with Engels suggests his research suffers from a problem he is eager to ascribe to others: “an astonishing ignorance of what Marx had written.”⁴⁵

Of course, Thomas is not ignorant of what Marx had written. But why then continue to insist on the divergence thesis when the extant evidence, as Hunley points out, “should demonstrate to anyone not utterly blinded by ideology that Marx and Engels basically agreed with each other”?⁴⁶ It does seem that the proponents of the divergence thesis are motivated more by ideology than by evidence. Indeed, Carver and Thomas argue not merely (and justifiably) that Marx’s legacy should be disassociated from the inheritance of Stalinism but also (and unjustifiably) that it should similarly be disassociated from modern revolutionary politics.⁴⁷ Tom Rockmore’s anti-Engelsian position is different from Carver’s and Thomas’s because he accepts that “Marx and Engels agree[d] politically,” while insisting that they “disagree[d] philosophically.”⁴⁸ Rockmore’s argument benefits from recognizing, contra Carver’s claim that Marx conceived the transition to socialism through “constitutional” and “peaceful” means, that Engels was right when he said in his eulogy to Marx that his collaborator was “above else a revolutionist.”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Rockmore is wrong about Marx and Engels’s supposed philosophical disagreements.

Engels’s own assessment of his part in the formulation of the theoretical foundation of their political perspective is famously, and unduly, self-deprecating. A year after Marx’s death he claimed in a letter to Johann Philipp Becker, August 15, 1884, to have been merely “second fiddle” to Marx:

My misfortune is that since we lost Marx I have been supposed to represent him. I have spent a lifetime doing what I was fitted for, namely playing second fiddle, and indeed I believe I acquitted myself reasonably well. And I was happy to have so splendid a first fiddle as Marx. But now that I am suddenly expected to take Marx’s place in matters of theory and play first fiddle, there will inevitably be blunders and no one is more aware of that than I. And not until the times get somewhat more turbulent shall we really be aware of what we have lost in Marx. Not one of us possesses the breadth of vision that enabled him, at the very moment when rapid action was called for, invariably to hit upon the right solution and at once get to the heart of the matter. In more peaceful times it could happen that events proved me right and him wrong, but at a revolutionary juncture his judgement was virtually infallible.⁵⁰

Four years later in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, he elaborated on this modest appreciation of his contribution in print:

Lately repeated reference has been made to my share in this theory, and so I can hardly avoid saying a few words here to settle this point. I cannot deny that both before and during my forty years' collaboration with Marx I had a certain independent share in laying the foundations of the theory, and more particularly in its elaboration. But the greater part of its leading basic principles, especially in the realm of economics and history, and, above all, their final trenchant formulation, belongs to Marx. What I contributed—at any rate with the exception of my work in a few special fields—Marx could very well have done without me. What Marx accomplished I would not have achieved. Marx stood higher, saw further, and took a wider and quicker view than all the rest of us. Marx was a genius; we others were at best talented. Without him the theory would not be by far what it is today. It therefore rightly bears his name.⁵¹

It would, of course, be foolish to deny Marx's greater part in his collaboration with Engels. But this fact is hardly surprising given that even in his youth one of his contemporaries, Moses Hess, felt justified in describing Marx thus:

He is a phenomenon...the greatest—perhaps the only genuine—philosopher of the current generation. When he makes a public appearance, whether in writing or in the lecture hall, he will attract the attention of all Germany.... He will give medieval religion and philosophy their *coup de grâce*; he combines the deepest philosophical seriousness with the most biting wit. Imagine Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel fused into one person—I say fused not juxtaposed—and you have Dr Marx.⁵²

To say that Engels (or anyone other than a latter-day Aristotle) failed to match the intellectual level of someone who could reasonably be described in these terms is not particularly illuminating. It is much more interesting to recognize, with Anderson, that Engels had significant intellectual strengths and that he made a number of important contributions to his and Marx's joint theoretical perspective.

Indeed, Marx was the first to recognize Engels's strengths and to disabuse him of his uncalled-for humility. For instance, in a letter of July 4, 1864, he wrote: "As you know. First, I'm always late off the mark with everything, and second, I inevitably follow in your footsteps."⁵³ This assertion was especially true in the 1840s when Engels played not merely an important but also a leading role in their intellectual and political partnership. Thereafter, the two men worked closely together in a collaboration through which each learned from the other and both became considerably more than they would have been had they merely worked alone.

The divergence thesis, by contrast, tends to make far too much of relatively minor differences between the two men and, at worst, to invent differences where they do not exist to suit the particular predilections of each critic. Commenting on Levine's variant of this argument, Alvin Gouldner writes that "it is typical of Levine...that his formulations are not merely inexact but ludicrous."⁵⁴ He adds that the idea that Engels initiated the vulgarization of Marx's ideas continues to hold sway "less because of its intellectual justification than because of the need it serves": the divergence myth effectively allows critics of Marxism to lay blame on Engels for whatever aspect of classical Marxism they want to reject.⁵⁵ In effect, this approach has informed a tendency to reimagine Engels, as Edward Thompson put it, as the "whipping boy" who has been saddled with any defect "that one chooses to impugn to subsequent Marxism."⁵⁶ However, the anti-Engels literature is largely negative in scope and far from coherent. Because Engels's critics generally dump onto him whichever part of Marxism they dislike, they are inclined, as Hunley points out, to

contradict “one another and sometimes even themselves.”⁵⁷ More to the point, what Arthur calls the Engels-phobic literature tends to be so keen to denounce Engels that authors of this persuasion skirt over significant problems with their own arguments.⁵⁸

This criticism is particularly true of attempts by Engels’s critics to evidence some degree of coherence between his views and Stalin’s debased version of Marxism. Carver and Thomas, for instance, share Levine’s belief that Stalin’s ideology can be derived from “Engelsism.” As Carver wrote in 1981, “political and academic life in the official institutions of the Soviet Union...involves a positive commitment to dialectical and historical materialism that derives from Engels’s work but requires the posthumous imprimatur of Marx.”⁵⁹ A couple of years later, he wrote that “the tenets” of Engels’s philosophical works were “passed on lectures, primers and handbooks, down to official Soviet dialectics.”⁶⁰ However, though it has often been repeated that Stalin’s interpretation of historical and dialectical materialism (Histmat and Diamat, as they became known in the Soviet Union) derived from Engels’s work, it is less often noted that Stalin’s attempt to legitimize his counterrevolutionary regime by reference to Marxism and the October Revolution led him to gut Marx and Engels’s thought of its revolutionary essence.

In respect to Engels’s thought, Stalin explicitly rejected a number of key ideas that derived from his work. He expunged from official Soviet theory Engels’s critique of the idea of socialism in one country, his view that socialism would be characterized by the withering away of the state, and his claim that the law of value would cease to operate in a socialist society. In relation to philosophy, Stalin removed the concept of the “negation of the negation” from the account of dialectics that became orthodoxy in Russia in the 1930s.⁶¹ These parts of Engels’s thought were not insubstantial aspects of his Marxism. As Alfred Evans points out in a claim that sits ironically beside the attempts by Carver and others to wrench Marx from Marxism so as to reimagine him as a theorist of constitutional and peaceful change, Stalin’s “innovations” underpinned a reinterpretation of Marxism from which “any revolutionary implications for socialist development” was severed.⁶² Stalin also acted to reify the historical schema presented in Marx’s 1859 preface of his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* so as to exclude from orthodoxy Marx and Engels’s concept of an “Asiatic mode of production,” through which they had aimed to make sense of oppressive class relations in societies without private property relations and which might easily be deployed to illuminate class relations in Soviet Russia.⁶³ If the political reasoning behind this decision is obvious enough, the fact that, as he attempted to justify the role of the state in Soviet economic development, Stalin nonetheless felt compelled to invert Marx’s account of the relationship between base and superstructure, as outlined in this famous essay, illuminates how he revised Marx and Engels’s thought not as part of a healthy developing tradition of inquiry but through the incoherent demands associated with the more mundane task of justifying the socialist credentials of “a nonsocialist society.”⁶⁴

As it happens, not only is Engels’s thought incompatible with Stalinist ideology, but his ideas can be and have been profitably mined to make sense of the counterrevolutionary essence of Stalinism.⁶⁵ In this sense at least, Stalin’s revisions of Marxism reflect his better understanding of the critical and revolutionary implications of Engels’s thought than is evident in the work of many of the anti-Engels faction: it is precisely because Engels’s ideas were so critical and revolutionary that they were incompatible with Stalin’s dictatorship. And if the revolutionary essence of Engels’s thought helps explain why Stalin aimed to neuter his Marxism, the anti-Stalinist implications of his work are good reason why modern socialists should seek an honest reassessment of his contribution to social and political theory.

A similar point could be made in relation to Engels’s much-maligned concept of a dialectics of nature. Since the publication of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, a defining

characteristic of the Western Marxist tradition has included a rejection of Engels's attempt to root Marxist theory in a dialectical understanding of nature.⁶⁶

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács suggested that Engels's unfortunate extension of the concept of dialectics from the social to the natural realms led him to ignore the "most vital interaction, namely the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process," without which "dialectics ceases to be revolutionary."⁶⁷ Interestingly, though Lukács's critique of Engels's thought has had a very strong influence on the anti-Engels literature, it is somewhat cursory, amounting to no more than a passing comment supported by a twelve-line footnote. Besides, this comment was balanced by other comments in the text that seemed much more compatible with Engels's arguments, for instance, where he wrote of "the necessity of separating the merely objective dialectics of nature from those of society."⁶⁸ As it happens, within a couple of years of the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács did write much more substantially, and much more positively, about the idea of a dialectic in nature:⁶⁹

Self-evidently the dialectic could not possibly be effective as an *objective principle of development* of society, if it were not already effective as a principle of development of nature before society, if it did not already *objectively exist*. From that, however, follows neither that social development could produce no new, equally objective forms of movement, dialectical movements, nor that dialectical movements in the development of nature would be *knowable* without the mediation of the new social dialectical forms.⁷⁰

This passage is evidence that Lukács continued to reject philosophical reductionism, without collapsing, as Antonio Gramsci and Karl Korsch had warned was a possible consequence of rejecting the dialectic of nature, into "the opposite error...a form of idealism."⁷¹ Unfortunately, while Lukács, Gramsci, and Korsch differentiated between reductive and nonreductive interpretations of Engels's idea of a dialectic of nature, Engels's modern critics tend to be adamant that the concept of a dialectics of nature lends itself inevitably to mechanical materialism and positivism.

John Bellamy Foster has argued that this critique of Engels emerged out of a one-sided interpretation of what he calls the "Lukács problem." Whereas Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, incoherently combined a denial that the dialectical method is applicable to nature because of the missing subjective dimension with a recognition of the existence of a distinct, objective, dialectics in nature, Western Marxism has tended simply to deny the existence of a dialectic in nature.⁷² This claim not only contradicts what we know of Marx's generally supportive comments on Engels's work on the dialectics of nature, but it also underpins a strong tendency toward forms of philosophical idealism. Consequently, rather than explore Marx's work for tools to help exculpate Marxism from the twin pitfalls of mechanical materialism on the one side and philosophical idealism on the other, Western Marxists have tended to lend their support to the project of driving a wedge between an idealist interpretation of Marx and a mechanically materialist interpretation of Engels.⁷³

By contrast with this approach, Foster, following Andrew Feenberg and Alfred Schmidt, has detailed how, through the concept of sensuous human activity, Marx's work provides the necessary tools to make sense of the dialectical relationship between nature and society. According to Foster, Marx's materialism assumes what he calls a form of "natural praxis" through which human sensuous practice is understood to be embodied in the sensuous world itself. Our perceptions of the world are rooted in our natural senses, but, contra empiricism, the senses through which nature becomes aware of itself are not merely passive recipients of information from the external world, but are active and developing processes within the natural world whose development continues and deepens

through humanity's productive interaction with nature. Foster insists that the concept of natural praxis is compatible with Engels's emergentist conception of reality while avoiding the pitfalls of reductionist readings of Engels's work.⁷⁴

Moreover, and much more interestingly, he argues that this conception of praxis coheres with contemporary ecological concerns. Prefiguring modern ecology's concern with humanity's oneness with nature, Engels's conception of a dialectics of nature opens a space through which ecological crises could be understood in relation to alienated nature of capitalist social relations. Because production is first and foremost a metabolic exchange with nature, alienated relations of production include an alienated relationship to nature itself. Consequently, the same forces that underpin capitalism's tendency toward economic crises generate parallel tendencies toward environmental crises. Marx and Engels's understanding of the unity of humanity and nature is thus suggestive of a revolutionary perspective that is simultaneously political, social, and ecological in scope: the socialist revolution would involve not merely a transformation of social and political relations, it would also necessarily involve a radical transformation of humanity's relationship to nature. The internal relationship between capitalist and ecological crises informs Foster's argument that Engels's claim that "nature is the proof of dialectics" can and should be revised to read that "ecology" has become "the proof of dialectics."⁷⁵ So, whereas Engels's critics have tended to reimagine Marx as merely a social theorist, Engels's philosophical writings illuminate the powerful ecological dimension of his and Marx's thought, and consequently the internal link between ecological concerns and anticapitalism.

Foster's argument powerfully illuminates my contention that it would be a grievous mistake to lose sight of Engels's fundamental, overwhelmingly positive and still relevant contribution to socialist theory and practice. His thought shares the central strengths of Marx's work, whose themes he often prefigured, while he made powerful and independent contributions to Marxism in his own right. And it is my belief that the left would benefit enormously from a serious reassessment of his work.

Alongside Marx, Engels worked a revolution in theory: the two of them famously synthesized French socialism, German philosophy, and English political economy into a new revolutionary perspective on society. This genuinely collaborative project was forged through the odd medium of a fragmentary manuscript that remained unpublished in their lifetimes and that has come down to posterity as *The German Ideology*. Though this text is problematic, its production nonetheless represents, as Marx wrote and Engels reiterated, a key moment of "self-clarification" through which their subsequent theoretical and practical project was framed. Commenting on this period in their lives, Korsch writes:

Marx and Engels during the next two years worked out in detail the contrast prevailing between their own materialist and scientific views and the various ideological standpoints represented by their former friends among the left Hegelians (Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner) and by the philosophical belles-lettres of the "German" or "true" socialists.⁷⁶

By contrast with both Marx's and Engels's retrospective assessments of the significance of the moment when they wrote the manuscripts that have come down to us as *The German Ideology*, it is a characteristic of the anti-Engels literature to attempt to downplay the extent to which these manuscripts evidence a pivotal moment in the process of their intellectual self-clarification.⁷⁷

One problem with this line of argument is that even though *The German Ideology* never existed as a proposed book, Marx and Engels did work up their ideas into a form that they attempted to have

published in 1845–46.⁷⁸ And as Carver himself has pointed out, the sketch of Marx's method outlined in his 1859 preface closely follows the language of the chapter on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*.⁷⁹ More to the point, Arthur argues that all the insights from their earlier writings are synthesized in these manuscripts through the idea that people make and remake themselves through their social and productive interaction with nature to meet their evolving needs.⁸⁰ This perspective was both rooted in and oriented toward the new proletarian form of social practice, and as a philosophy of praxis it was first tested and deepened through a remarkable political intervention into the revolutionary events of 1848–49.

The decade of the 1840s was a moment of great democratic expectation when the mismatch between Europe's existing institutions of power on the one hand and the new social reality of burgeoning capitalist development on the other informed a growing sense of radical change across the continent.⁸¹ If the defeat of this movement occasioned Marx and Engels's systematic reflections on their own practical and theoretical contributions to the movement, their subsequent work is best understood as extending and deepening the approach they forged in the 1840s: 1848 became the touchstone for everything else they wrote and did.⁸² Subsequently, their unique and profound collaboration remained undiminished up until Marx's death in 1883, after which Engels continued their project both through his own political and theoretical works and by preparing for (re)publication a number of Marx's writings including, most importantly (and controversially), the second and third volumes of *Capital*.⁸³

If the fundamentals of Marx and Engels's strategy were forged collaboratively in the mid-1840s, Engels was already moving in the direction of their joint project before he met Marx and he subsequently made independent and important contributions to their collaborative work. Gareth Stedman Jones is right to point out that

a number of basic and enduring Marxist propositions first surface in Engels's rather than Marx's early writings: the shifting focus from competition to production; the revolutionary novelty of modern industry marked by its crises of overproduction and its constant reproduction of a reserve army of labour; the embryo at least of the argument that the bourgeoisie produces its own gravediggers and that communism represents, not a philosophical principle, but "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things"; the historical delineation of the formation of the proletariat into a class; the differentiation between "proletarian socialism"; and small-master or lower-middle-class radicalism; and the characterisation of the state as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the ruling propertied class.⁸⁴

This is an incredibly impressive list by any measure. Yet it does not tell the whole story. Beyond Engels's codiscovery of the working class as a potential revolutionary agent of change, he was the first socialist to recognize the importance of trade union struggle to the socialist project. He also laid the foundations for a historical understanding of the emergence of women's oppression and a unitary theory of its capitalist form. Alongside Marx, in *The German Ideology*, Engels elaborated a materialist conception of history through a synthesis of the idea of practice with a historical conception of material interest, and shortly thereafter he penned the first work of "Marxist" history—instigating an immensely productive and influential tradition.⁸⁵ In his drafts of what became *The Communist Manifesto*, he applied the general perspective outlined in *The German Ideology* to the specific context of Germany in 1847, formulating a deeply democratic conception of socialism as a necessarily international movement—which incidentally showed that at its inception Marxism precluded Stalin's notion of socialism in one country. Furthermore, against the dominant socialist voices of his day, Engels recognized that the struggle for socialism was not a zero-sum game. He

insisted that socialists should support bourgeois democratic movements while maintaining the political independence of the workers' party with a view to challenging the bourgeoisie for power immediately upon the defeat of absolutism. He deepened this theory of "revolution in permanence" through his involvement in the revolutions of 1848 when, alongside Marx, he played a key role as a journalist in raising the general strategic analysis outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* to the level of practice: extending, deepening, and shifting their perspective along the way.⁸⁶ Subsequently, he played a role in the military struggle against Prussian absolutism. And after the defeat of this movement, he focused much of his intellectual energies on developing a materialist analysis of military power—and in so doing, "the General," as he became known in the Marx household, became one of the nineteenth century's greatest military thinkers.⁸⁷ Though it has often been dismissed as a mere eccentricity, Engels's military writings were of the first importance to nineteenth-century revolutionary strategy and remain of interest to modern socialists despite the significance of changes to military power over the succeeding century.⁸⁸

Perhaps most importantly, Engels also won generations of socialists over to Marxism through his popularization of the Marxist method. And along with his own and his collaborative works, he also prepared the second and third volumes of Marx's *Capital* for publication—and though modern scholarship has picked holes in this project, he nonetheless performed a Herculean task in presenting these manuscripts as coherently as possible. The left has benefited enormously from his efforts.⁸⁹

There were, of course, numerous problems with Engels's contribution to the Marxist project: on reformism, value theory, nationalism, and the task of formulating a unitary theory of women's oppression, among other contributions, his thought suffered from important gaps and outright errors. But it would be wrong, indeed gravely so, to allow these weaknesses to cloud our judgment of Engels's contribution to Marxism.⁹⁰ What Lenin once said of Rosa Luxemburg might equally be said of Engels: "eagles may at times fly lower than hens, but hens can never rise to the height of eagles." Luxemburg, like any truly original thinker, made important theoretical and political mistakes, yet she was an intellectual and political eagle.⁹¹ Similarly, whatever his weakness, Engels was an intellectual and political eagle whose writings remain of the first importance to those of us on the contemporary revolutionary left whose aim it is to avoid the limitations of reformism without collapsing into sectarianism while simultaneously forging an ethical and ecological socialism that escapes the moralistic "impotence in action" of so much modern leftist rhetoric.⁹²

Notes

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10. ← Hal Draper, [*Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*](#), vol. 1 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 24.
11. ← John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto, 2010), 121.
12. ← Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 119; Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 39.
13. ← Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 9, 43.
14. ← Carver, *Marx and Engels*, 157.
15. ← Carver, *Engels*, 76; see, by way of comparison, Carver, *Marx and Engels*, 129-30; Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 48.
16. ← Carver, *Engels*, 48; Carver, *Marx and Engels*, 97; see, by way of comparison, Rockmore, *Marx's Dream*, 79.
17. ← Carver, *Marx and Engels*, 116.
18. ← John Green, *Engels: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Artery, 2008), 313; John Stanley and Ernest Zimmerman, "On the Alleged Differences between Marx and Engels," *Political Studies* 32 (1984): 227.
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20. ← Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-2004), 120.
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26. ← Rigby, *Engels and the Formation of Marxism*, 4, 8.
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32. ← Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, 505; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 45,

60-66.

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34. ← Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, 63-64.
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40. ← Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 17, 114.
41. ← Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, vol. 1, 23.
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43. ← Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 45, 411-14; see, by way of comparison, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 45, 392-94.
44. ← Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 39.
45. ← Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 3
46. ← Hunley, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels*, 145.
47. ← Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism*, 1-8; Carver, *The Postmodern Marx*, 111-12.
48. ← Rockmore, *Marx's Dream*, 4.
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54. ← Alvin Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 283.
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65. ← Tristram Hunt, *Marx's General* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2009), 361-62; Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia* (London: Pluto, 1974), 165; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 266.
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73. ← Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 226.
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78. ← Carver and Blank, eds., *Marx and Engels's "German Ideology" Manuscripts*, 7.
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