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Friedrich Engels- A Critical Centenary Appreciation
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Friedrich Engels — A Critical Centenary Appreciation

INTRODUCTION

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SINCE THE CRUMBLING OF THE WALL in Berlin and the demise of so-called “really existing socialism,” a triumphant cry has been heard everywhere in the conformist press, radio, TV and academia: Marxism is dead! A well known philosopher even wrote: “Marxism is definitely dead for humanity.” Was this written in 1989 or in 1991? In fact, the phrase is from Benedetto Croce and it was written in... 1907. Could it be that the present prophecies will fare no better than those so confidently proclaimed eighty years ago? Apparently Marxism has a sort of resilience that permits it to “resurrect” itself again and again. Of course, it is currently in a serious crisis, but have not crises, difficulties, contradictions and problems been a permanent feature of its existence in the last hundred years?

In fact, during the last three or four years there has been an increasing interest in Marxism in the public sphere, in Europe, the USA, Latin America and elsewhere. A continuous flow of books, reviews in daily newspapers, international conferences, and, last but not least, social movements seems to be bringing Marx back to center stage of cultural and political debate. This debate is taking new forms, in which Marxism can be discussed on its own terms, and no longer in its caricatural form as a bureaucratic state ideology (Stalinism and its heirs).

The renewed interest in Engels is part of this pattern. Of course, the 1995 centennial of his death provided an occasion for meetings, conferences and publications. But beyond this immediate pretext, the reason for this new attention given to the ideas and writings of Marx’s closest friend is not unrelated to the general political/cultural background described above. Once the need for a radical critique of capitalism and for a coherent alternative to it is felt by a growing number of people — trade-unionists, students, intellectuals — it is not surprising that the co-author of the *Communist Manifesto* is also being read,

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studied, and re-assessed. Once Karl Marx’s ideas again become part of the intellectual agenda of the times, it is only logical that those of Friedrich Engels, his comrade in arms and scientific collaborator, begin to be discussed too.

Friedrich Engels, 100 year after his death in London on August 5, 1895, remains a most intriguing and stimulating thinker and organizer. He is one of these truly remarkable historical

personalities who even after a century cannot be portrayed in simple strokes. The richness and breadth of his personality and manifold activities and studies he undertook remain a subject of continuing study. Due to his life-long friendship and collaboration with Karl Marx, Engels cannot be studied in isolation. The intertwining of their works, their daily correspondence, and their sincere personal commitments towards each other warrant integrated study of both founders of the modern labor movement. Nevertheless within this close collaboration we see two very distinct characters, with different backgrounds, lifestyles and intellectual and practical orientations. Too often we have seen attempts to create a kind of Holy Duality with semi-religious connotations. This type of hagiography, typical of the tradition of the Second and especially the Third International, not only hampers the proper understanding of the dynamics and historical role of the two friends, but also blocks the continuation and expansion of the program they started. As a reaction to this attitude we also encounter numerous attempts to artificially separate the two men, mostly with the objective of promoting Marx to the position of universal (and therefore politically neutralized) thinker and to degrade Engels to the position of an operationalist schema-builder and moral founder of social-democratic degeneration and the Stalinist nightmare.

Friedrich Engels was, in his own right, one of the most talented and interesting political personalities of the last half of the 19th century. Born on November 28, 1820, in a staunch Pietist family in Barmen, an industrial town in the Rhineland, he developed with an incredible pace into a broad, open-minded and extremely creative personality. His great intellectual capacities tied to his deep human involvement in social life are exemplified by his first major work: *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. This work, written at the age of only 24, was the result of a 20-month stay in Manchester. His father had sent him there in an attempt to keep him away from German politics, only to get him back, fully committed to the emancipation

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of the working class as well as to his later companion Mary Burns, who introduced young Engels to the real life of proletarian Manchester.

Engels rapidly engaged himself in the rising socialist movement, which brought him into contact with Karl Marx. In 1848 they wrote together the landmark publication of the labor movement: *The Communist Manifesto*. Engels was not a scholar in the sense of working concentratedly for a protracted period of time on one subject. He was a flamboyant, smoking, drinking, horse-riding, drawing and writing universal activist. He could read almost two dozen languages and became an expert on military affairs. He was one of the first to connect the role of technology and armament with political power, and in that sense he can be considered as the first researcher on the military—industrial complex. He wrote the first important book on the emancipation of women and the family in the history of the socialist movement. He spent many years learning modern sciences, including biology, physics, and chemistry. He wrote an immense number of articles, letters and political pamphlets on a great variety of subjects, while being forced to spend a good deal of his time working for a textile company (of which his family was a junior partner) in Manchester, in order to make a living and to be able to support others (especially Marx). The most extreme example of Engels' intellectual capacities is the fact that he was able, in the only twelve years he survived Marx, to arrange the publication of the second and third volumes of *Capital* from the pile of handwritten notes Marx had left behind, and this along with his continuing activities in the labor movement and his own prolific writing.

In the life and works of each energetic and multi-talented person, it is always possible to

find a great number of immature, incorrect or even false statements and opinions. In our view the place of a person in history should be measured by the totality of his activities within the context of his time and the role his personality and works played in stimulating and helping his contemporaries and future generations in creative, emancipatory activities. It goes without saying that Friedrich Engels initiated, alone and in close collaboration with Karl Marx, such a monumental number of studies, political initiatives and cultural and philosophical insights that a serious, thorough and critical survey of his works is still a politically and intellectually rewarding exercise, in the spirit of the two friends, all of whose studies aim at understanding the world in order to change it.

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The papers collected in this issue of *Science & Society* were presented in two separate but interrelated events, on the occasion of Friedrich Engels' centennial: one at the Cultural Center of Wuppertal, Germany — near his birthplace — and the other at the University of Paris 10, Nanterre, France. Some of the participants were present at both international conferences, but others could only attend one of them. The papers, but not the rich and often passionate debates that took place at the events, were recently published: Labica Delbraccio, 1997; Bergmann, Kessler, Kircz and Schäfer, 1996. The diversity of topics, the plurality of political and/or theoretical viewpoints and the scholarly quality of the presentations at both conferences are fully documented in these two publications.

The present selection, which includes papers from both Wuppertal and Nanterre, is an initiative of the Institute for Critical Research (ICR). The ICR is a broad international network of Marxist scholars, dedicated to using social research as a means of exploring emancipatory possibilities in the contemporary world. ICR adherents can be found in Europe, the United States, Latin America, Africa and Asia. Founded in Amsterdam in 1993, the ICR helped to organize the two international Engels Conferences in 1995, and several of its members actively participated in the debates. The two guest editors of this issue of *Science & Society* belong to the ICR's administrative board.

As we have already emphasized, since it was obviously impossible to publish in this journal all the papers presented in the French and German conferences, a selection had to be made. As with every choice, this one also inevitably has an element of arbitrariness, and does not include many valuable texts. Priority was given to papers that present a general assessment of Engels, and to those that critically discuss his contribution to the issue of women's emancipation — one of the questions where the contemporary relevance of his writings is most evident. Issues that have been extensively dealt with during the debate on Engels during the last few years — such as the differences between Engels and Marx, and the modifications he introduced when editing volumes II and III of *Capital*— have been left out. Other important issues, such as his work on geopolitical and military problems as well as the whole realm of the national question and ethnicity, could not be covered. On the other hand, we are happy to present some lesser known aspects of his work such as on: agrarian problems, reli-

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gion, anti-semitism and utopia. Some papers also revisit “classical” debates, on natural science and on the party, examining them from a new standpoint.

Again, these were not the only possible choices, and many important studies were not included, either because they were absent from the two European conferences, or because lack of space prevented us from publishing them here. Our apologies to the authors, as well as to readers.

In any case, the present collection forms a coherent whole, insofar as all these texts assembled here share the belief that Engels' contribution to philosophy, social science and emancipatory struggles is still relevant today, but that it has to be submitted to a substantial critical assessment, dealing with its obvious shortcomings and weaknesses. Avoiding the common extremes of beatification or denunciation, they give us a concrete and balanced viewpoint of specific aspects of Engels' thought as a scientist and as a revolutionary.¹

Georges Labica's paper focuses on the role played by Engels in the construction of a Marxist philosophy, *i.e.*, dialectical materialism. Since Marx ceased, after *The German Ideology*, to be concerned with philosophical issues, it was left to Engels to attempt to deal with this area of reflection. All his philosophical interventions — such as *Anti-Dühring* or the so-called “philosophical letters” — were made as reactions to others. The paper discusses the reception of Engels' philosophical views by Lenin and then by Stalin — the producer of so-called “Marxism—Leninism” — as well as by various Western Marxists such as Lukács, Gramsci, or Manuel Sacristan. Unlike some of his successors, Lenin understood that philosophy cannot be external to history and therefore to politics.

In his contribution on Engels as a perceived system-builder, Gert Schäfer analyzes the false claim that Engels built a closed philosophical system that could be blamed for the almost religious “diamat” system of latter-day Stalinism. In a lucid way Schäfer shows how Engels was always an adversary of dogmas and eternal truths, and that his writings have unfortunately been irresponsibly simplified as well as

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canonized. Already during his lifetime, the open-minded Engels had to fight against system builders and people who tried to fit a complex reality into easily understandable rules and “laws.”

Henri Maler examines carefully the complex itinerary of Engels' ideas on utopia, from his early writings to the pseudo-testament of *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1877). The considerable power of Engels' pamphlet lies in his attempt to bring dialectics and utopia together. However, his viewpoint in this chapter of *Anti-Dühring* — opposing science to utopia, in spite of his admiration for Saint Simon's, Owen's and Fourier's achievements — is a partial and incomplete assessment. If one takes into account Marx's and Engels' work in the entirety of its scope and history, it appears that the transition from utopia to science is not the mere transmission of a heritage, but also a rescue.

Joost Kircz complements this discussion by taking Engels' investigations in the natural sciences as a starting point for discussing a socialist understanding of science. The prolific polemicist Engels published his famous *Anti-Dühring* as a frontal attack against the growing popularity of the metaphysical ideas of Eugen Dühring in the German socialist movement. The book, which is an unbalanced mixture of deep insights, sarcastic polemics and random scientific samples, became a catechism for dogmatic so-called dialectical materialism. Kircz discusses the weaknesses of Engels' writings on science and tries to take their philosophical essence one step further in the direction of the necessary understanding of the relation of science to, and its role in, human emancipation.

¹It should be noted that in most of the papers it was not possible to tally quotations with published English-language texts or to reference those texts. Quotes from Engels, Marx and others have been newly translated, or re-translated, into English. Wherever possible, the references indicate which editions of the classical texts have been used by the authors

Engels showed a much greater interest in religious issues than did Marx, while sharing, of course, his friend's materialist and atheistic standpoint. Michael Löwy tries to show, in his paper, that Engels was particularly interested in the critical or even revolutionary role of religion in history, from ancient Christianity— a religion of slaves and poor people — until the German Peasant War (16th century) and the English Puritan Revolution (17th century). In spite of his tendency to analyze religion as merely the “reflection” of real conditions, Engels would occasionally— as in the case of Thomas Müntzer, the revolutionary Anabaptist preacher — acknowledge the utopian and anticipatory function of certain forms of insurgent religious consciousness.

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Josette Trat's interesting contribution is a critical survey of Engels' views on a complex of interrelated issues: the origin of the family, the sexual division of labor, women's serfdom in the family, sexual love between individuals, and the conditions for women's emancipation. In spite of their various shortcomings, Engels' reflections — once stripped of their dogmatic aspects — are still relevant to three important discussions: a) the question of women's emancipation beyond formal equality of rights between men and women; b) the intimate links between gender oppression and class exploitation; and c) the interrelations between the sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production.

Frigga Haug, in her contribution, concentrates on the “woman question” in Engels. She critically analyzes where, in the process of describing the historicity of the problem, Engels tends to lean too much on its class aspects to the detriment of its gender aspects. In the development of the insight that the economic and social basis determines present-day class structures and repression, the idea took shape that after a victorious socialist revolution all the negative results of class society would in principle be overthrown. The emphasis on the social revolution as turning point in human history overshadowed the need for understanding the autonomous gender factor. Haug discusses non-wage labor in society and criticizes the formal claim by Engels that only if women are fully integrated into modern, large-scale industry can the social inequality between women and men be overcome.

In the framework of the debate on gender and women's emancipation, William Pelz, in his contribution, underlines the importance of Engels as a historian, in the sense that Engels broke decisively with history as the story of “great men.” Already in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and further in *The Peasant War in Germany*, but especially in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, he developed a new way of understanding the actual as a historical process of economics and its related power structures. Class and gender received their proper place as crucial categories in the understanding of human history and *a fortiori* of human emancipation.

Since the last world war, a great sensitivity to anti-semitism and proto—anti-semitism characterizes the debate on the historical role of the Jewish people. In an elaborate contribution, Mario Kessler pre-

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sents a profound study of Engels and anti-semitism. He clearly puts Engels' early utterances in their social—historical context and shows how in the course of time Engels developed a more and more explicit stance vis-à-vis anti-semitism. From a position of contempt for the miserable and backward position of East European Jews, he developed a balanced approach of understanding the important role of the emerging Jewish proletariat and the important

trailblazing role of Jews in the emancipatory labor movement. Kessler concludes that Engels played a decisive role in the mobilization of the socialist movement against anti-semitism, and warned clearly of the exploitation by imperialism of anti-semitism.

The renowned expert on agriculture and socialism, Theodor Bergmann, reviews Engels' positions on the role of the peasantry and especially the problem of land ownership in relation to class struggle. He deals with the appreciation of historical peasant movements and their potential for revolt, despite their cultural backwardness. Engels' suggestion not to expropriate smallholders by force after a victorious revolution is discussed in the wider context of the disastrous policies adopted in the USSR and China.

In the final contribution Elvira Concheiro asserts that Engels' theoretical and practical works yield a rich variety of elements regarding the concept of political parties, which are very relevant today when socialist political struggle confronts a severe crisis and unprecedented challenges. Engels, as well as Marx, considered the party as a tool for the emancipation of the workers, but this did not prevent him from scrutinizing and severely criticizing the parties to which he had links. Engels and Marx did not have a universal and unchangeable theory of the party, but considered parties as the expression of real political movements, which occur in specific times and places and in particular social contexts. From the 1840s until the time of his death, Engels kept up a lively interest in English political parties, and in particular the attempts by English workers to create a proletarian party. He believed in the capacity of the workers to organize and act with the goal of overthrowing . He believed in the capacity of the workers to organize and act with the goal of overthrowing the prevailing social arrangements.

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