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Frederick Engels: Co-Founder of Marxism

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Frederick Engels is often referred to as the world's first Marxist. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Engels was a collaborator of Marx, contributing in equal measure to the evolution of the Marxist world outlook.

However, with his characteristic self-effacing modesty, Engels may have proudly accepted this status.

Marx and Engels jointly wrote prefaces to every new edition of the '*Communist Manifesto*' on its frequent republication in several languages. To the 1883 German edition, published soon after Marx's death, Engels wrote the following moving preface:

“The preface to the present edition I must, alas, sign alone. Marx, the man to whom the whole working class of Europe and America owes more than to any one else – rests at Highgate Cemetery and over his grave the first grass is already growing. Since his death [March 14, 1883], there can be even less thought of revising or supplementing the Manifesto. But I consider it all the more necessary again to state the following expressly:

“The basic thought running through the Manifesto – that economic production, and the structure of society of every historical epoch necessarily arising therefrom, constitute the foundation for the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently (ever since the dissolution of the primaeval communal ownership of land) all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social evolution; that this struggle, however, has now reached a stage

where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie), without at the same time forever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression, class struggles – this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx.

“I have already stated this many times; but precisely now is it necessary that it also stand in front of the Manifesto itself.”

However, Marx himself acknowledges Engels as an equal collaborator in the evolution of the Marxist world outlook and the special place he gave Engels in the unfolding of its theoretical foundations.

Marx-Engels Collaboration

Marx was editing a paper called '*Rheinische Zeitung*', which was banned by the reactionary Prussian state in March 1843, during the period of the fierce battle between the anti-feudal forces and the reactionaries backed by the State. In order to continue with his work, Marx moved to Paris in the beginning of 1844. There he began editing a journal, '*Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher*'. Engels became the youngest contributor and later collaborator of this publication. In 1844, Engels contributed an article, '*Outline of a Critique of Political Economy*'. In this, Engels laid the foundational principles for the critique of bourgeois political economy. Engels demonstrated that all important phenomena in the bourgeois economic system arise inevitably from the rules of private ownership of the means of production and a society without poverty could only be possible in a society without this private ownership. This immensely fascinated Marx. He came to the conclusion that through a critique of bourgeois political economy, another thinker had come, independently, to the same conclusion that he had come to with his critique of Hegelian philosophy. It was this that cemented the lifelong collaboration, friendship, camaraderie and joint contributions in the evolution of Marxist world outlook.

The pioneering work by Engels, '*The Condition of the Working Class in England*', greatly influenced Marx's line of thinking in the beginnings of the industrial revolution that was taking place in England. Engels spent time with his family's textile business in Manchester, which was then a pioneering centre of the industrial

revolution. This work of Engels established the basis of the critique of bourgeois political economy and the conclusion that he derived, along with subsequent works, was that the emancipation of the working people was not possible unless the material conditions of production, based on private property, that heap such exploitation are overthrown.

In August 1844, Engels visited Paris to meet Marx. The two had earlier met at Cologne in 1842. But this was of no major consequence on their future collaborative thinking process. During ten days of exchanges in August 1844, Marx's admiration for Engels grew enormously. He admired Engels' courage, dedication, single-mindedness and noted that both were in agreement on all theoretical questions of the day.

Battling the influence of idealism on philosophy and political economy, they collaborated in the first of their joint works in 1844, *'The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism'*.

In this, Marx and Engels together proved that neither super natural forces, nor human consciousness, nor heroes, make history. It was the working people alone who moved society forward through their labour and their political struggles. This showed that the proletariat cannot free itself without abolishing its own living conditions, i.e., contemporary society – capitalism. The historical liberating mission of the proletariat, as a class, was elaborated. This laid the foundations for all subsequent works.

However, at the philosophical level, the dominant idealism had to be combatted and the materialist foundations had to be established. This, Marx and Engels together, worked out in the *'German Ideology'* in 1845-46. For the first time, in a comprehensive and systematic manner, they worked out the fundamentals of dialectical and historical materialism – the world outlook of the working class.

In fact, the period 1843 to 1845 marks a watershed in the evolution of the Marxist world outlook – a transition from revolutionary democracy to proletarian revolution, from Hegelian influence to historical materialism and from philosophy to political economy. In this, both Marx and Engels played the primary role together.

Marx's critical examination of Hegelian philosophy of Law led him to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended either by themselves or on the basis of the development of the human mind or consciousness but on the material conditions of life. Hegel coined the term "civil society" as the reflection of the ideal social order which would evolve under the supernatural influence of the "unfolding of the absolute". Marx, however, came to the conclusion "that the anatomy of this civil society has to be sought in political economy". From this, he proceeded to come to the seminal foundation of dialectical materialism: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness".

Combining the critiques of philosophy and political economy, Marx and Engels developed this revolutionary theory which found expression in the joint authorship of the '*Communist Manifesto*' in 1848 and subsequently the formation of the First International in 1864.

Additionally, the signal contribution of Engels was to extend dialectical materialism to other fields of human activity.

Dialectics and Science

The Marxist understanding of the ever unfolding human-nature dialectic was developed and enriched by Engels as he viewed nature always as a whole and as a process. The human being, as everything else in the universe, is an integral part of nature. This holistic view and universalization of science constitutes the basis for the appreciation of scientific developments and their utilization for universal human welfare.

We can do no better and reproduce passages from a section of J D Bernal's tribute to Engels published as a '*Labour Monthly*' pamphlet, on the 40th anniversary of his death, (*Marxist Internet Archive/marxists.org*)

"Engels was able to unify his conceptions of science in such a way that he could naturally assimilate new developments as they appeared, in an extremely sane and balanced way. The secret of this power lies in the materialist dialectic which

he used in his analysis of the results of science. It was from Hegel that he learnt to appreciate, not things, but processes, and he always looked at the position which science had reached at any time in relation to its historical background. This is clearly seen in his essay on Feuerbach, where he traces the history of materialist philosophy in relation to the development of science and productive methods. For instance, he says:

“ `But during this long period from Descartes to Hegel and from Hobbes to Feuerbach, the philosophers were by no means impelled, as they thought they were, solely by the force of pure reason. On the contrary. What really pushed them forward was the powerful and ever more rapidly onrushing progress of natural science and industry. Among the materialists this was plain on the surface, but the idealist systems also filled themselves more and more with a materialist content and attempted pantheistically to reconcile the antithesis between mind and matter. Thus, ultimately, the Hegelian system represents merely a materialism idealistically turned upside down in method and content. . . .

“ `The materialism of this last (19th) century was predominantly mechanical, because at that time, of all natural sciences, mechanics and indeed only the mechanics of solid bodies—celestial and terrestrial—in short, the mechanics of gravity, had come to any definite close.... (this) constitutes a specific but at that time inevitable limitation of classical French materialism.

“ `The second specific limitation of this materialism lay in its inability to comprehend the universe as a process—as matter developing in an historical process. This was in accordance with the level of the natural science of that time, and with the metaphysical, *i.e.*, anti-dialectical manner of philosophising connected with it. Nature, it was known, was in constant motion. But according to the ideas of that time, this motion turned eternally in a circle and therefore never moved from the spot; it produced the same results over and over again.’ (*Feuerbach*, pp. 36 and 37.)

“As a historian of science Engels is particularly distinguished. He was the first to understand with Marx the close relation between the development of scientific theory and of productive methods. Much of what now passes for new in the interpretation of historical science is to be found in the pages, of *‘Dialectic and Nature’*. He notices, for instances, that the theory of heat did not develop from pure thought, but from a study of the economic working of steam engines, and

comes to the conclusion: 'Until now they have only boasted of what production owes to science, but science itself owes infinitely more to production.' In particular he shows how the metaphysical and statical attitude of the 18th century materialists based on Newton was broken down in favour of a view which reflects, though unconsciously, a dialectical progress: 'The beginnings of revolutionary science faced a through and through conservative nature, in which everything is to-day as at the beginning of the world, and will be to the end of the world the same as it was at the beginning.'

"It was not the scientists but the philosophers who made the first breach in this fossilised outlook. In 1755 appeared Kant's 'General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens.' The problem of the first impulse was here set aside. The earth and the whole solar system appeared as something become in the course of time. If, before the appearance of this thought, the overwhelming majority of scientists had not felt the fear expressed by Newton in his warning 'Physics, Beware of Metaphysics!' then they would have drawn from this single discovery of genius by Kant such consequences as would have saved them infinite errors along circuitous paths, and an immense quantity of time and labour expended in a false direction. In Kant's discovery lay the germ of all further progress. If the earth was something which had become, then all its present geological, climatic and geographical condition had become also, its flora and fauna as well, and it must have a history not merely in space, but in time also. (Quoted by V. L. Komarov in *Marxism and Modern Thought*, p. 205. See also M.E.A., Vol. 2, p. 244.)

"As a result of these movements of thought, Engels says:

" 'The old teleology has gone to the devil, but now we have the knowledge that matter in its perpetual circulation moves according to laws that at certain stages—now here, now there—necessarily produce the thinking mind in organic existence.'" (M.E.A., Vol. 2, p. 175)

Thus, reconfirming the materialist basis of human consciousness.

It was this holistic view of nature and discovering dialectics in its processes that enabled Engels to venture into the explorations of the dialectic method in almost all spheres of human activity and endeavours.

Human-Nature Dialectic

The foundations of dialectical and historical materialism is the perpetual human-nature dialectic, i.e., the efforts by human beings to appropriate nature for better life and living conditions. In this dialectical process, while humans utilize and transform nature to their advantage, nature also transforms humans and impacts on human evolution. Engels, in his essay, *'The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man'*, shows how the human-nature dialectic shaped evolution itself based on Darwin's law of correlation of growth. He showed how labour played a role in the development of the hands, tools, human senses, speech etc. These were not the products of some divine creation, but its origins lie in the material basis of life. Engels demonstrated that the enlarged brain size and consequent greater intelligence was neither accidental, nor, due to heavenly benediction. Its evolutionary development was a result of the perpetual human-nature dialectic that created the conditions for standing in an upright posture freeing movement and dexterity and the consequent impact this had on the evolutionary process. As consciousness evolved and developed since the times of Engels, this unfolding of the human-nature dialectic is becoming all the more clear.

Consider just one example: Recent advances and discoveries by scientists and sleep researchers on why we sleep and what happens when we sleep have shown, amongst many other fascinating insights, that genetically human beings are divided amongst those who sleep early and wake up early and those who sleep late and wake up late. The former are called the "larks" and the latter the "owls". It is estimated that these categories number 40 per cent each of the human race. This sleep pattern is embedded in their genetic code. The rest of the 20 per cent are those whose timings vary to ensure that at every moment of the 24-hour day and night cycle, somebody is awake.

This establishes that as humanity developed, in the initial period (hunter-gathering stage) of primitive communism and community living, it became necessary to guard the communal living spaces from attacks and dangers. Thus, human-nature dialectic evolved to shape different genetic codes for different individuals to ensure that vigilance is maintained round the clock. It is, thus, the material conditions of life that also influenced the shaping of the process of evolution.

It is often erroneously assumed that nature is static. Engels showed that the unfolding of nature on the basis of its laws is nothing else but based on the laws of dialectics. This can be understood only by discovering and applying the dialectical method to comprehend nature and its unfolding in all its glory. The human-nature dialectic also shapes the evolutionary process, as noted above. At the time of primitive communism and community living, the social interaction involved in the process of primitive production required the need to communicate, which developed through gestures and signs, eventually leading to the development of language. This was a leap forward in the evolutionary process. Development of language provided early human beings not only the means for communication but also provided the ability to form complex cognitive processes. The consequent evolution of complex thought process led to the development of higher levels of consciousness shaping both the cognition of nature and the development of human productive forces and consciousness.

Dialectics of Nature: Engels further explored dialectical materialism with regard to nature and scientific development. His enquiry revealed a seminal conclusion: “There could be no question of building the laws of dialectics into nature, but of discovering them in it and evolving them from it”. From this effort to comprehend science from the materialist standpoint, even when science had not developed to the levels as of today, he concluded that, dialectics is “nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought”.

It must be kept in mind that Engels conclusions in the ‘*Dialectics of Nature*’ was based on the scientific knowledge, data and theories of his time. As scientific knowledge increased vastly since then, many idealists do not tire in showing that Engels was wrong on this or that aspect. But the fact remains that the dialectical method and laws is the basis for comprehending the laws of nature is resoundingly vindicated.

In fact, as science advanced and new discoveries came to the fore, whether it be from explorations of outer space and knowledge of the universe, to, the advances in genetics, genetic mapping and genetic engineering, these provided greater comprehension of the general laws of motion and development of nature, as Engels had pointed out.

Dialectics and Anthropology: Engels applied the laws of historical materialism to the anthropological evidence, available in his time, of early human societies. In the *'Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State'*, Engels strips away the myths surrounding modern class society and demonstrated how property-based class relations shaped the origins of family, marking the historical defeat of the 'female sex' – the evolution of monogamy and patriarchy and the consequent oppression of women.

Dialectics and History: Engels' *'The Peasant War in Germany'* (1849-50) was, in fact, the first direct application of dialectical materialism in the treatment of history.

Dialectics and Philosophy: While Marx was pre-occupied in dissecting "the anatomy of civil society", i.e., political economy of 'modern society' – capitalism, that led him to his magnum opus *'Das Kapital'*, Engels took on the task of debunking the 'grand theory' put forward by philosopher, Eugen Duhring, as a rebuttal of Marxism. In order to dispel the sympathy amongst sections of the German social democrats that Duhring received, Engels entered into a brilliant lucid polemic to both debunk this erroneous theory and articulate the fundamental principles of the Marxist world outlook. This work, *'Anti-Duhring'*, had an influential impact in vindicating the validity of Marxism, dialectical and historical materialism.

It is, therefore, clear that in almost every sphere of human activity and endeavor, Engels made a seminal contribution both independently and jointly in collaboration with Marx. From the elaboration of the human-nature dialectic through the fields of natural sciences, anthropology, history, political economy and to philosophy, Engels left behind a distinct contribution for developing the revolutionary movement and its theoretical foundations.

'Comrades-In-Arms'

In addition to the intellectual collaboration between Marx and Engels in developing jointly the Marxist world outlook and Engels's own independent contributions to the evolution of the ideas of historical materialism, the hallmark of

their lives has been the abiding friendship and the extraordinary sharing between them. Much of such finer human aspects of their collaboration, unfortunately, is not in common currency.

The difficulties, tribulations they faced in their lives were overcome by their commitment to each other through their friendship that they maintained throughout their lives. At a moment of great personal loss, Marx wrote to Engels, “Among all the fearful torments I have recently had to endure, the thought of you and your friendship has always sustained me, as, has the hope that there is still something sensible for us to do together in the world”.

It is known that Marx was living for years in abject poverty. He never earned enough as a freelance journalist. At this time, Engels accepted a post as a clerk with a Manchester cotton firm in order to earn enough to be able to send some money to Marx. Engels sacrificed his own literary aspirations to enable Marx to complete *Das Kapital*. At times, when Engels was not able to help Marx substantially, he supplemented this by writing articles, under Marx’s name, for the *New York Daily Tribune* for which Marx was paid. By 1860 Engels was earning over £ 1000 a year, a handsome amount at that time. In 1864 he became a partner in his father’s business and was able to help Marx financially to save his property and pay his gas bills. Upon retirement in 1870 Engels made an annual allowance of £ 350 for Marx to complete the manuscript of *Kapital* Vol. I. After submitting this for print, Marx writes to Engels, “So this volume is ready. Its completion is due to you and you alone! Without your sacrifice on my behalf I could never have got through the immense amount of work that has been put into the three volumes. I embrace you full of thanks”.

Engels was a qualified military theoretician. His analysis of military operations and military historical science and his application of the dialectical materialist methodology were demonstrated in his articles in the *New York Daily Tribune* during the Crimean War. Reacting to these articles, Marx wrote to Engels, “your military articles have created a great stir. A rumour is circulating in New York that these were written by General Scott”.

Political Activity

While developing such theoretical foundations, these two giants of the international working class movement were not mere academic theoreticians but active participants, at times, leading and guiding the working class movements of their times. The Communist League, so renamed at the insistence of Marx and Engels from the earlier named 'League of the Just', commissioned Marx and Engels to write the '*Programme*' of their party. It is believed that the Engels prepared the initial draft, which was then re-worked by both, into the historical document giving the revolutionary clarion call '*Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains*'.

These founding giants of Marxism dedicated their life for building a revolutionary organization capable of leading the working class to victory. In 1864, they played an important role in the establishment of the International Workingmen's Association, popularly known as the First International. This was the first effort to bring together various Leftwing workers groups into a common organization and was an important step forward for the international working class movement.

However, with the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, the First International had to be wound up. It was Engels who, when the time came for the establishment of the Second International, argued that the International should now be transformed from consisting of only trade unions and workers associations. Every country's working class must establish their political party, i.e., the Communist Party. The Second International was an international of political parties of the working class.

In addition to joint theoretical works of immense significance in combatting the influence of revisionism in the working class movements and in the struggle for independence of the class movement, Marx and Engels played a very influential practical role. Both were implacably hostile to the internal squabbles of various petty bourgeois organisations which were turning political activity into careerism and intrigue. Much of their work in the First International jointly and by Engels independently in the formation of the Second International had focused on this.

Scientific and Revolutionary

The irresistible attraction of Marxism, Lenin once said, lies in the fact that it is the only philosophy that combines the quality of being strictly and supremely scientific with that of being revolutionary. This combination is neither accidental nor because its founders – Marx and Engels – combined in their life the qualities of a scientist and a revolutionary. Marxism combines these two aspects “intrinsically and inseparably”. This is the creative science of Marxism.

After Marx’s death, the international working class and the world became aware of the rich works and theoretical foundations of the Marxist outlook mainly through Engels. The vast volumes of notes left behind by Marx were arranged and edited by Engels. ‘*Capital*’ (Volumes II and III) were prepared by Engels editing these notes. Engels continued to write prefaces to the ‘*Communist Manifesto*’ and other newer editions of their works on the basis of contemporary developments enriching the international working class struggles and urging its forward movement.

As Lenin had said, Engels “taught the working class to know itself and be conscious of itself, and he substituted science for dreams” , describing him as a “great fighter and teacher of the proletariat”.