

# Friedrich Engels Was More Than Second Fiddle to Karl Marx

BY

MARCELLO MUSTO

Friedrich Engels once wrote that he played “second fiddle” to Marx. On the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, we should remember the profound influence that Engels had on his friend and comrade, as well as his own theoretical contributions.

Friedrich Engels understood even earlier than Karl Marx the centrality of the critique of political economy. In fact, at the time the two radicals were first getting to know one another, Engels had published many more articles on the topic than his friend.

Born two hundred years ago, on November 28, 1820, in Barmen, Germany (today a suburb of Wuppertal), Friedrich Engels was a promising young man whose father, a textile industrialist, had denied him a chance to study at university and instead guided him into his private firm. Engels, an atheist, was self-taught and had a voracious appetite for knowledge. He signed his pieces with a pseudonym to avoid conflict with his conservative, strongly religious family.

The two years he spent in England — where he was sent at the age of twenty-two to work in Manchester, at the offices of the Ermen & Engels cotton mill — were decisive for the maturation of his political convictions. It was there that he personally observed the effects of capitalist exploitation of the proletariat, private property, and competition between individuals. He made contact with the Chartist movement and fell in love with an Irish working woman, Mary Burns, who played a key role in his development.

A brilliant journalist, he published accounts in Germany on English social struggles and wrote for the English-speaking press about the social advances underway on the continent. His *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, published in the *Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher* in 1844, aroused great interest in Marx, who at the time had decided to devote all his energies to the same subject. The two began a theoretical and political collaboration that would last for the rest of their lives.

# Engels's Influence

In 1845, Engels published his first book in German, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. As its subtitle emphasized, this work was based “on direct observation and genuine sources”: Engels wrote in the preface that real knowledge of proletarian working and living conditions was “absolutely necessary to be able to provide solid ground for socialist theories.” In his introductory dedication, “To the Working Class of England,” Engels further pointed out that his work “in the field” had given him direct, not abstract, “knowledge of the workers’ real lives.” He had never been discriminated against or “treated by them as a foreigner,” and he was happy to see that they were free of the “terrible curse of national narrowness and national arrogance.”

---

**“He had become, as he put it, the ‘second fiddle’ to Marx, and in order to support himself and to help his friend (who was often without an income) he agreed to manage his father’s factory in Manchester.”**

---

In the same year that the French government expelled Marx because of his communist activities, Engels followed him to Brussels. There, they published *The Holy Family, or the Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company* (his first joint book with Marx). The two also produced a voluminous manuscript — *The German Ideology* — though this was unpublished and thus left to the “gnawing criticism of mice.” In the same period, Engels went to England with his friend and showed Marx firsthand what he had earlier seen and understood about the capitalist mode of production. It was then that Marx gave up the critique of post-Hegelian philosophy and began the long journey that led, twenty years later, to the first volume of *Capital*. The two friends also wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) and participated in the revolutions of 1848.

In 1849, following the defeat of the revolution, Marx was forced to move to England, and Engels soon crossed the Channel after him. Marx took up lodgings in London, while Engels went to manage the family business in Manchester, some two hundred miles away. He had become, as he put it, the “second fiddle” to Marx, and in order to support himself and to help his friend (who was often without an income) he agreed to manage his father’s factory in Manchester, until 1870.

## The Marx-Engels Correspondence

During these two decades, the two men lived the most intense period of their lives, comparing notes several times a week on the main political and economic events of the age. Most of the 2,500 letters they exchanged date from between 1849 and 1870, during which period they also sent some 1,500 items of correspondence to activists and intellectuals in nearly twenty countries. To this imposing total should be added a good ten thousand letters to Engels and Marx from third parties, and another six thousand which, though no longer traceable, are known with certainty to have existed. This correspondence is a treasure, containing ideas which, in some cases, neither Marx nor Engels succeeded in fully developing in their writings.

Few nineteenth-century correspondences can boast references as erudite as those that flowed from the pens of the two communist revolutionaries. Marx read nine languages, and Engels mastered as many as twelve. Their letters are striking for their constant switching between languages and for their number of learned quotations, including ancient Latin and Greek. The two humanists were also great lovers of literature. Marx knew passages from Shakespeare by heart and never tired of leafing through his volumes of Aeschylus, Dante, and Balzac. Engels was long president of the Schiller Institute in Manchester and worshipped Aristotle, Goethe, and Lessing. Along with constant discussion of international events and revolutionary possibilities, many of their exchanges concerned the major contemporary advances in technology, geology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and anthropology. Marx always considered Engels an indispensable interlocutor, consulting his critical mind whenever he had to take a position on a controversial matter.

While great intellectual companions, the sentimental relationship between the two men was even more extraordinary. Marx confided all his personal difficulties to Engels, beginning with his terrible material hardship and the numerous health problems that tormented him for decades. Engels showed total self-abnegation in helping Marx and his family, always doing everything in his power to ensure them a dignified existence and to facilitate the completion of *Capital*. Marx was ever grateful for this financial assistance, as we can see from what he wrote

one night in August 1867, a few minutes after he had finished correcting the proofs of Volume I: “I owe it to you alone that this was possible.”



## Engels's Theoretical Contribution

Even during those twenty years, however, Engels never ceased to write. In 1850 he published *The Peasant War in Germany*, a history of the revolts in 1524–25. There, Engels sought to show how similar the middle-class behavior at the time was to that of the petty bourgeoisie during the revolution of 1848–49, and how responsible it had been for the defeats incurred. In order to allow Marx to devote more time to the completion of his economic studies, between 1851 and 1862 Engels also wrote nearly half of the five hundred articles that Marx contributed to the *New-York Tribune* (the paper with the largest circulation in the United States). He reported to the American public on the course and possible outcomes of the many wars that took place in Europe. On more than one occasion he managed to foresee developments and to anticipate the military strategies used on various fronts, earning for himself the sobriquet by which he was known to all his comrades: “The General.” His journalistic activity continued for a long time, and in 1870–71, while he was also very active in the International Working Men’s Association, he published his *Notes on the Franco-Prussian War*, a series of sixty articles for the English daily *Pall Mall Gazette* analyzing the military events preceding the Paris Commune. These were well-received and testified to his insight into military matters.

Over the next fifteen years, Engels made his principal theoretical contributions in a series of writings directed against political opponents in the workers’ movement. Between 1872 and 1873 he wrote a series of three articles for the *Volksstaat* that were also released, as a pamphlet, with the title *The Housing Question*. Engels’s intention was to oppose the spread of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s ideas in Germany and to make clear to workers that reformist policies could

not replace a proletarian revolution. The *Anti-Dühring*, published in 1878, which he described as “a more or less connected exposition of the dialectical method and the communist world outlook,” became a crucial point of reference for the formation of Marxist doctrine.

Although Engels’s efforts to popularize Marx — polemicizing with other simplistic readings — should be distinguished from the vulgarizations of the later generation of German Social Democracy, his recourse to the natural sciences did open the way to an evolutionary conception of social phenomena that diminished Marx’s more nuanced analyses. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), a reworking of three chapters of *Anti-Dühring*, had an even greater impact than the original text. But despite its merits, and the fact that it circulated almost as widely as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Engels’s definitions of “science” and “scientific socialism” would later be used by the Marxist-Leninist vulgate to preclude any critical discussion of the theses of the “founders of communism.”

*The Dialectics of Nature*, fragments of a project on which Engels worked sporadically between 1873 and 1883, has been the object of huge controversy. For some it was the cornerstone of Marxism, while for others the main culprit in the birth of Soviet dogmatism. Today it should be read as an incomplete work, revealing Engels’s limitations but also the potential contained in his ecological critique. While his use of dialectics there certainly reduced the theoretical and methodological complexity of Marx’s thought, it would be incorrect to hold it responsible — as many have done — for everything they find disagreeable in Marx’s writings, or to blame Engels alone for theoretical errors or even political defeats.

---

**“Different from the German Social Democrats, who manipulated his text in a legalistic, reformist sense, Engels insisted that the ‘fight on the streets’ still had its place in the revolution.”**

---

In 1884, Engels published *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, an analysis of the anthropological studies conducted by the American Lewis Morgan. Morgan had discovered

that matriarchal relations historically preceded patriarchal relations. For Engels, this was as important a revelation concerning the origins of humanity as “Darwin’s theory [was] for biology and Marx’s theory of surplus-value for political economy.” The family already contained the antagonisms that would later be developed in society and the state. The first class oppression to appear in human history “coincided with the oppression of the female sex by the male.” With regard to gender equality, as well as anticolonial struggles, Engels never hesitated to uphold the cause of emancipation. Finally, in 1886, he published a polemical work that took aim at the resurgence of idealism in German academic circles, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886).

## Reading Engels in 2020

Engels outlived Marx by twelve years. During that time, he devoted himself to his friend’s literary estate and to the leadership of the international workers’ movement. His enormous contribution to the growth of workers’ parties in Germany, France, and Britain is evident in a number of journalistic pieces for the major socialist papers of the time, including *Die Neue Zeit*, *Le Socialiste*, and *Critica Sociale*, in greetings to party congresses, as well as the hundreds of letters that he wrote in this period. Engels wrote extensively on the birth and ongoing debates concerning the Second International, whose founding congress took place on July 14, 1889. Even more important, he devoted his energies to the spread of Marxism.

Engels was charged with the extremely difficult task of preparing for publication the drafts of Volumes Two and Three of *Capital* that Marx had not managed to complete. He also oversaw new editions of previously published works, a number of translations, and wrote prefaces and afterwords to various republications of Marx’s works. In a new introduction to Marx’s *Class Struggles in France* (1850), composed a few months before his death, Engels elaborated a theory of revolution that tried to adapt to the new political scene in Europe. The proletariat had become the social majority, he argued, and the prospect of taking power through electoral means — with universal suffrage — made it possible to defend revolution and legality at the same time.

Different from the German Social Democrats, who manipulated his text in a legalistic, reformist sense, Engels insisted that the “fight on the streets” still had its place in the revolution. The revolution, Engels continued, could not be conceived without the active participation of the masses, and this required “long and patient work.” Reading Engels today, two hundred years on from his birth, fills us with a new desire to strike out along the path he blazed.