

Not Marx — Marx and Engels!

To mark the Engels centenary, Tom Willis takes a look at the theoretical revolution carried through by both Marx and Engels in 1844-5.

IT WAS THE new understanding of labour as the *diffentia specifica* of human beings, jointly worked out by both men, that paved the way for Marx's devastating critique of capitalism. If we are to honour Engels' contribution to Marxism then this is where we must start.

Frederick Engels died 100 years ago this month. For nearly four decades he was Marx's closest collaborator, playing a pivotal role in the development of that fusion of French socialism, English political economy and classical German philosophy that became Marxism: the theory and practice of working class revolution.

Marx and Engels worked together continuously from the beginning of their intellectual partnership in 1844-5 until Marx's death in 1883, corresponding almost daily. It was Engels who prepared *Capital Volumes II* and *III* for publication.

Though Marx was undoubtedly the greater talent, at every stage in their collaboration there was interaction and mutual development and not a simple pupil-teacher relationship. Yet Engels has not received the credit he deserves.

In place of a rounded assessment of his real input in the formation of the new world view, Engels has become a convenient target for bourgeois critics and academic Marxists alike, who would seek to divorce elements of Marx's critique of capitalism from his overall materialist and dialectical outlook, and instead, incorporate a sanitised Marxism into one or other stand of radical or not so radical sociology. Given this situation, it is necessary to restate Engels' real legacy.

In doing so it will become perfectly clear that the traditional academic cliché about the supposed division between the subtle, humanist-inclined "young Marx" and the crass positivist and vulgar evolutionist older Engels is simply so much pseudo-intellectual gibberish.

Let us pose the issues as sharply as possible. There is a direct intellectual continuity between the collaborative work of Marx and Engels, such as *The German Ideology* and Engels' last writings like *Ludwig Feuerbach* and *Dialectics of Nature*. There is a much greater distance between the really early Marx of 1843-4 and the first clear expressions of Marx and Engels' new outlook, one year later, in *The German Ideology* and Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*.

In 1843 Marx expresses the revolutionary role of the working class for the first time. In his *Introduction to a critique of Hegel's Phi-*

losophy of Right Marx identifies the proletariat as a class with "radical chains... which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity."

But at this stage the struggle of the working class and Marx's critique of the state and civil society are not systematically linked together.

Marx has discovered that the situation of the working class is so desperate that it requires a revolution against the old order. Thus the working class will "realise philosophy". Yet the link between the two — between theory and practice — can only be developed by an analysis of capitalism and a study of political economy. It is only at this point that Marx becomes interested in Engels' critique of society in which people produce as "dispersed atoms without consciousness of your species", in an "unconscious, thoughtless manner" (*Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, 1844).

Marx takes up the story: "Frederick Engels, with whom... I maintained a constant exchange of ideas by correspondence, had by another road (compare his "Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844") arrived at the same result as I, and when in the spring of 1845 he also settled in Brussels, we resolved to work out in common the opposition of our view to the ideological view of German philosophy, in fact, to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience. The resolve was carried out in the form of a criticism of post-Hegelian philosophy."

"The manuscript... had long reached its place of publication in Westphalia when we received the news that circumstances did not allow of it being printed. We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticisms of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose — self clarification." [*The German Ideology*].

Marxism, according to Marx himself, came into being as a result of intellectual convergence and collaboration between Marx and Engels.

What was the new world view? It was no pre-conceived philosophical schema to which reality had to be made to fit, in the style of a Hegel. Marx and Engels defined it very clearly in the *German Ideology*:

"The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way."

"The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the

rest of nature...

"Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life..."

"As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce."

To summarise: history is made by real individuals in definite circumstances, not by some independent power outside of or above us. Society is a natural product, the outcome of social labour which is the defining characteristic of humanity in relation to the rest of nature. People must distinguish between the labour process "what they produce" and its social form "how they produce".

It is this understanding of the natural necessity of the labour process as distinguished from the precise social form through which it is carried out at a given time that provides the philosophic basis for three crucial elements in Marxism:

- (i) the critique of political economy
- (ii) the materialistic theory of knowledge
- (iii) Engels' theory of human origins, developed in *The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*.

First, the origin of political economy. In *Capital*, Marx says this about the labour process:

"Labour is in the first place a process in which both man and Nature participate and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature..."

"We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi* and to which he must subordinate his will."

In *The Grundrisse* — the rough draft for

Capital — Marx also used the notion of social labour to underpin his critique of the unreal, abstract, individualism of bourgeois economics — a critique of individualism that reminds us of Engels' comments on production as "dispersed atoms" some 15 years earlier.

"To begin with the question under discussion is material production. Individuals producing in a society, and hence the socially determined production of individuals is of course the point of departure. The solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, who serves Adam Smith and Ricardo as a starting point, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of eighteenth-century romances à la Robinson Crusoe... It is the anticipation of "bourgeois society" which began to evolve in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century made giant strides towards maturity. The individual in this society of free competition seems to be rid of the natural ties etc, which made him an appendage of a particular, limited aggregation of human beings in previous historical epochs. The prophets of the eighteenth century... envisaged this individual — a product of the dissolution of feudal society on the one hand and of the productive forces evolved since the sixteenth century on the other — as an ideal whose existence belongs to the past. They saw this individual not as an historical result, but as the starting-point of history; not as something evolving in the course of history, but posited by nature, because for them this individual was in conformity with nature, in keeping with their idea of human nature...

"The farther back we trace the course of history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and to belong to a large whole. At first, the individual in a still quite natural manner is part of the family and of the tribe which evolves from the family; later he is part of a community of one of the different forms of the community which arise from the conflict and the merging of the tribes. It is not until the eighteenth century that in the bourgeois society the various forms of the social texture confront the individual as merely means towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, namely that of the isolated individuals, is precisely the epoch of the (as yet) most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a social animal in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can individualise himself only within society. Production by an isolated individual outside society — a rare event, which might occur when a civilised person who has already absorbed the dynamic social forces is accidentally cast into the wilderness — is just as preposterous as the development of speech without individuals who live together and talk to one another..."

It is precisely Marx's understanding that human beings are social animals that can "individualise themselves only within society" that powers the denunciation of capitalism as an inhuman system.

When Marx came to deal with the superficial critics of the labour theory of value he

once more returned to the notion of social labour he had jointly worked out with Engels over two decades earlier. He put the issues like this in a letter to his friend Kugelmann:

"All the gossip about the necessity of proving the concept of value is based on the most complete ignorance, as much of the problem under discussion as of the scientific method. Every child knows that any nation which stopped work — I will not say for one year — but just for a couple of weeks, would die. And every child knows that the volume of products corresponding to the various needs calls for various and quantitatively determined amounts of total social labour. It is self-evident that this necessity of the division of social labour in certain proportions is not at all negated by the specific form of social production but can only alter its mode of appearance. Natural laws can never be negated. Only the form in which those laws are applied can be altered in historically different situations."

The fundamental difference between Marxism and post-Marxist bourgeois "neo-classical" economics lies in the basic concepts on which the two theories are built up.

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Marx's theory starts from an analysis of human labour in society, and the specific social form that the products of labour take under capitalism: the commodity form, things to be bought or sold on the market.

Bourgeois "neo-classical" economics turns the real world on its head. Its starting point is an absurd, contentless abstraction: the idea that all goods possess "general utility" in a market made up of atomised individuals who ideally possess perfect knowledge of all commodities.

Of course, the idea of any specific really existing thing being useful in general is ridiculous. Buckets and ladders are not interchangeable. Your CD player will not work as a washing machine.

On the other hand, Marx's basic notion of social labour is something real. It provides the only non-tautological explanation of money.

If there is one Marx quote that the anti-Engels lumpen-intelligentsia love it is his first thesis on Feuerbach.

"The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is con-

ceived only in the form of the object of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism — which of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judicial manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of "revolutionary", of "practical-critical", activity."

The above lines are supposed to prove that Marx would have been no party to Engels' "crude" reflective materialism according to which knowledge is simply a reflection of matter in motion.

Unfortunately for the anti-Engels brigade, Marx and Engels were both perfectly capable of combining the two aspects in a coherent whole. For instance at the same time as the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx observed "When reality is depicted philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence." Now if depicting reality isn't a "reflection" theory of knowledge, what is?

Engels — who rather inconveniently for his academic critics is the man responsible for publishing the *Theses on Feuerbach* ("the brilliant germ of the new world outlook") — had no problem fusing the two aspects either, as he wrote in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*:

"But the question of the relations of thinking and being has yet another side: in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world itself? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the real world to produce a correct reflection of reality? In philosophical language this question is called the question of the identity of thinking and being..."

"There is yet a set of different philosophers — those who question the possibility of any cognition, or at least of an exhaustive cognition of the world. To them, among the more modern ones, belong Hume and Kant, and they have played a very important role in philosophical development. What is decisive in the refutation of this view has already been said by Hegel, in so far as this was possible from an idealist standpoint. The materialistic additions made by Feuerbach are more ingenious than profound. The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotchets is practice, namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable "thing-in-itself." The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such "things-in-themselves" until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the "thing-in-itself" became a "thing for us."