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# Introduction

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28 November 2020 marked the bicentenary of the birth of Friedrich Engels, prompting a wave of new reflections and scholarship on the German revolutionary philosopher who made pathbreaking and profound contributions to modern social and political theory, playing a critical role in the forging and development of classical Marxism.<sup>1</sup> The renewed relevance of many of the ideas of the co-author of *The Communist Manifesto* in our crisis-ridden world of late capitalism, where profits come before people and the planet, were rightly foregrounded by those marking the #Engels200 commemoration.<sup>2</sup>

Engels continues to be relevant to the urgent resistances needed today. His study of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) is a pioneering work of urban political ecology and urban sociology, that offers a vivid and human portrayal of the horrors which accompanied the Industrial Revolution. It includes an analysis of ‘social murder’, a concept which – as we learn from Judy Cox in this volume – Engels took and popularised from the British Chartist paper *The Northern Star*. This concept has taken on a new resonance in contemporary Britain after years of neoliberal privatisation, austerity and racism that culminated in the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, and the governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even hitherto under-regarded works, such as *Dialectics of Nature* (1883), have found new audiences, given the clear and present dangers of catastrophic climate change. Engels is now hailed as ‘one of the foundational ecological thinkers of modern times’.<sup>3</sup>

Readers of *Socialist History* will also always remember Engels as a great revolutionary historian, who, as Victor Kiernan noted, often tried to push Marx to be more historical in his writings.<sup>4</sup> Engels’ own historical writings often tend to be somewhat overlooked, with the possible exception of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), a pioneering analysis of women’s oppression as rooted in the rise of class

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society. Perhaps his most under-appreciated historical work is *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), which gives an overview of German historical development from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and an analysis of the bloody class struggles in medieval Germany during the Reformation in 1525. Written in the aftermath of the defeated German Revolutions of 1848-49, Engels' *Peasant War* gave his fellow revolutionaries an inspiring historical perspective for their struggle but it is also a pathbreaking model application of the new materialist conception of history, developed with Marx in 'The German Ideology'.

*Peasant War* is a pioneering and powerful demonstration of how to write 'total history' long before the term was coined. It is a total history of the sort that would later be demonstrated on a grander and even more panoramic scale by Leon Trotsky in the *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930). With its focus on human agency at its heart, the anthropologist Eric R. Wolf notes that it represented 'a milestone in social history' and 'a major contribution to debates about the historic role of the peasantry'.<sup>5</sup> Engels built on the empirical work of Wilhelm Zimmerman's three-volume *The General History of the Great Peasant War* (1841-43), but his study analytically penetrated to the material essence of the economic and social forces lying beneath the religious surface appearance of the conflict, which shaped the 'idealist' approach of Zimmerman. Engels' work should be recognised as a classic in part because of the seriousness with which he granted to the religious ideologies of the time. This interrogation of the 'inner connections' between millenarian ideas, class struggle and social revolution, remains one of his outstanding if neglected theoretical contributions to historical materialism.<sup>6</sup>

Engels' lifelong commitment to revolutionary history is further underscored by the fact that he planned to write a history of Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The impact of the 'Irish question' on Engels thinking more widely is explored in detail in this issue by Ken Olende. This special edition is a recognition of Engels the historian, and Engels as a thinker who enabled particular forms of radical historiography.

In May 1895 Engels retired to his favourite place of rest, the southern seaside town of Eastbourne. Even at this late hour, already weakened by the cancer that would kill him in a few months, he found time to attempt the final completion of the new edition of his *Peasant War* that would

recognise 1525 as ‘the cornerstone of Germany’s entire history.’ Engels felt it critical to lay stress on the central role of the journeymen-weavers. These ‘declassed, almost pariah-like, elements’ were a central basis of what became ‘the pre-proletariat, which in 1789 made the revolution in the suburbs of Paris and which absorbed all the outcasts of feudal and guild society.’<sup>8</sup> With the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Peasant War approaching in 2025, everyone inspired today by the tradition of radical history, people’s history and history from below, should acknowledge the intellectual debt owed to Engels, for whom the lowest stratum of society – the outcasts and pariahs – deserve and demand to be recognised and recorded as ‘the chief element.’

### **Engels in Eastbourne**

This special issue of *Socialist History* originates from an international conference, ‘Engels in Eastbourne’, we organised in June 2023 to commemorate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Communist Manifesto*. The conference was held in Eastbourne – not far from where the ashes of Engels were scattered off the coast at Beachy Head – at the View Hotel (owned by Unite the Union), and was supported by the Centre for Memory, Narrative and Histories (CMNH) at the University of Brighton and the International Association of Marx & Engels Humanities Studies (MEIA). We are grateful to our keynote speakers, Professor Terrell Carver and Professor Helena Sheehan, and to all who presented papers or attended the conference, which was enlivened by a significant delegation of scholars of Marxism from outside the United Kingdom, particularly from China.<sup>9</sup> It is regrettable to have to note that since the holding of that successful conference, the University of Brighton senior management team has successfully driven through its planned programme of mass redundancies of over 100 lecturers, including one of us. This has literally decimated the number of academic staff at the institution, though the resistance of members of the local branch of the University and College Union was heroic, mounting the longest running all out strike in British higher education history. Incidentally, the CMNH as a research centre which had existed for 15 years itself has also now been closed by the University of Brighton, while the University of Brighton’s campus at Eastbourne is closing in

2024. All of this comes in the context of the Tory government's reactionary agenda of contraction of the higher education sector, particularly targeting the arts and humanities in the post-1992 sector, and is not helped by the wider neo-liberal environment which has seen the commodification of higher education with tuition fees since the late 1990s. Nonetheless, not every post-92 institution management has felt the need to embark on the kind of brutal academic vandalism undertaken at the University of Brighton in response. The Humanities was particularly targeted in the mass redundancies at Brighton, and thus the work of radical history and radical politics had been at the forefront of their attack. The commitment to centring the importance of revolutionary history and politics which informed the organising of our conference is vital in the struggles of workers in Britain today, in HE and beyond.

The essays we are proud to publish in this special edition begin with Sheila McGregor's revisiting of Engels's masterful 1876 essay 'The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man', perhaps the most critical part of the *Dialectics of Nature*. McGregor surveys a range of recent anthropological literature, including from a 'female oriented socio-biological perspective'. Her essay defends Engels's stress on the importance of labour to social history as against Darwin's stress on the development of large brains. Arguing for the centrality of a focus on the role of labour, McGregor underlines the importance of 'locating our evolution in how we interacted with nature as our starting point'. Kate Connelly reappraises Engels's revolutionary journalism and in particular his lengthy reports on the 'June Days' of 1848 in Paris, published in the Cologne-based newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, and edited by Marx. Connelly's richly researched essay convincingly details how Engels was able to grasp both the essence and the complexity of the June Days. She demonstrates how he understood those days as both 'a conflict between some of Paris' most recently proletarianized workers who were defending their livelihoods and a project originating from socialist ideas about the "right to work" against a government which was also their employer'.

There have been many critiques of Marx and Engels in relation to a purported Eurocentrism which permeates their work. Some of these critiques have been flabby and ahistorical, others have been insightful and

challenging. Ken Olende's piece for this volume is an intervention in these debates where he stresses that Engels' approach to the colonised and non-European world was not a fixed and static one. Indeed, we learn how that it is particularly in relation to Engels' engagement with immigrant workers from Ireland and the Irish anti-colonial struggle that a significant shift in his thinking about the agency of the colonized is instantiated. Finally, Judy Cox revisits Engels' engagement with utopian socialism to trace the often mischaracterised relationship between forms of utopian socialism and Marxism. Her essay stresses the complex historical context in which Engels' engagement with utopian socialism emerged. She stresses the importance of Engels' insights for a revolutionary vision relevant to anti-capitalist politics today, particularly in relation to family and prison abolitionists, rightly noting 'Engels' analysis of utopian socialism can help to map out a socialist response to today's utopian, abolitionist and anti-capitalist movement'.

The men, women and children of the new-fangled working class that Engels encountered in the textile industries of West Germany and the Lancashire cotton mills profoundly shaped him, and he was among the very first to realise that the solidarity and democratic organisation emerging amid workers' struggles represented the basis of a concrete socialist alternative to the anarchy and tyranny of capitalist accumulation. Capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has unfolded precisely as a system with tendencies towards crisis and lurches towards barbarism in the form of imperialist war, fascism and now catastrophic climate change. The working class, in all of its global and multicultural dimensions still has the revolutionary potentialities, that Engels noted after his experiences in revolutionary Berlin in 1848, potentialities which show us glimpses of the path to genuine human emancipation.

## Notes

- 1 On Engels's theoretical contributions, see Paul Blackledge, *Friedrich Engels and Modern Social and Political Theory*, Albany, 2019.
- 2 For some recent scholarship, see for example 'Friedrich Engels and Geography', a special issue of *Human Geography* (Vol. 14, No. 2, July 2021) edited by Camilla Royle; Terrell Carver and Smail Rasic, eds, *Friedrich Engels for the 21st Century: Reflections and Revaluations*, Cham, 2022; Eberhard Illner, Hans A. Frambach and Norbert Koubek, eds, *The Life, Work and Legacy of Friedrich Engels: Emerging from Marx's Shadow*, London, 2023.
- 3 John Bellamy Foster, 'Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* in the Anthropocene', *Monthly Review*, 72, 6, (2020), <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/11/01/engelss-dialectics-of-nature-in-the-anthropocene/>
- 4 Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the writing of history*, London, 1992: 73.
- 5 Eric R. Wolf, 'The Peasant War in Germany: Friedrich Engels as Social Historian', *Science & Society*, 51, 1 (1987): 83.
- 6 Matt Perry, *Marxism and History*, Basingstoke, 2002: 53.
- 7 For a fragment of this history, see Engels, 'History of Ireland' (1870), at Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/history-ireland/ch01.htm> See also Aidan Beatty, 'The two Irish wives of Friedrich Engels', *Socialist History*, 60 (2021): 5-22.
- 8 Engels to Karl Kautsky, 21 May 1895, online at Marxists.org, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1895/letters/95\\_05\\_21.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1895/letters/95_05_21.htm)
- 9 For more on the conference, and Engels's own relationship to Eastbourne, see the website 'Engels in Eastbourne', <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/engelsineastbourne/>