

Frederick Engels: The First Marxist?

Bruce MacFarlane¹

The Editor

As activists ponder how much we can draw from the first volume of Karl Marx's *Capital*, a little more than 150 years after its publication, we should reflect also on how much we owe to Marx's comrade of forty years, Frederick Engels (1820–95). Without his mental, moral, and material support, Marx might well never have completed even that volume, which Engels revised for its third (1883) and fourth (1890) German editions. He also had to edit the second and third volumes, which Marx had been too ill to complete, guiding them to publication in 1885 and 1894. In the meantime, he oversaw an English translation of the first volume (1886–87).²

In presenting the third volume, Engels cautioned readers about the status of chapters 25–32, most of which he had placed in Part 5, which has the heading “Division of Profit into Interest and Profit of Enterprise.” “Part Five,” Engels wrote, “presented the major difficulty, and it was also the most important subject in the entire book when he [Marx] was attacked by one of the serious illnesses referred to above. Here, therefore, we did not have a finished draft, or even an outline plan to be filled in, but simply the beginning of an elaboration which petered out more than once in a disordered jumble of notes, comments, and extract material.”

For chapters 25 and 26, in particular, “the illustrative material had to be sorted out, and passages from other portions of the text had to be inserted,” giving Engels much trouble when assembling a publishable manuscript from the mare's nest that Marx had left. Engels confessed that he had failed at three attempts to fashion a version that “would at least contain,



Statues of Marx and Engels in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. By [Adam Harangozó](#) - Own work, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), [Link](#).

¹ ↪ My thinking on these topics has benefited hugely from six decades of discussion with the late Steve Cooper. —B. F.

² ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 26, 335–40.

by and large, everything the author had intended to include.” The impossibility of this approach left him with no alternative but to put the scraps into the best order he could while making “only the most necessary alterations,” which elsewhere included corrections to Marx’s commercial arithmetic.³

A circle of hell is reserved for the mean-spirited professors who, flush with tax-funded computers and research assistants, make reputations out of nitpicking at the editorial efforts of Engels, who, at 70 and with failing sight, worked almost unaided to bring the second and third volumes of *Capital* to publication while continuing to act as a nerve center for a worldwide working-class movement. Those whom Engels saw as “brooding eclectic flea-crackers” are not to be seen near a picket line.⁴

Comrades-in-Arms

Marx collaborated with Engels on *The Holy Family* (1844), *The German Ideology* (1845), and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), for which his *Principles of Communism* provided its first draft. So in unison were their trains of thought that it is often difficult to say who wrote what in their columns for the *New York Daily Tribune* between 1851 and 1862. For *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels reworked materials that he found among Marx’s papers.

Their correspondence in the fifty-volume *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (1976–2004) reveals how much Marx depended for matters large and small on Engels, who prompted the much-quoted phrase on history as farce succeeding tragedy. In 1858, he alerted Marx to the cell as G. W. F. Hegel’s “Being-in-itself,” a notion to which Marx attached “the value-form of the commodity.”⁵ No editorial intervention has proved more beneficial to the working class than Engels’s insistence that Marx reshape the first volume, inserting subheadings and turning six chapters into at least thirty-one.⁶

Engels had penned two reviews of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859–60. When it seemed that the first volume of *Capital* was also being ignored, he offered to write hostile reviews to stir up interest.⁷ In the end, he provided no fewer than eight favorable ones; the pity is that the *Fortnightly Review* declined his essay that would have introduced *Capital* to English audiences.⁸ Marx’s daughters, Jenny and Eleanor, assisted Engels in the tedium of protecting Marx from malign and ill-informed attacks, such as those by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Johann Karl Rodbertus, and Lujo Brentano, not to mention their followers.⁹

Many who like to repeat Engels’s recording of Marx’s quip that he was not a late-1870s French Marxist go on to allege that the problem with Engels is that he ended up a Marxist; that is to say, he sullied the purity of Marx’s thought with

³ ↪ Frederick Engels, preface to Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 94–95.

⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 372.

⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, 505; vol. 3, 178–79; vol. 40, 326; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 90. This was a connection revived by their joint reading of Rudolf Virchow’s *Cellular Pathology* in Manchester during May–June 1867, for which see Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 43,

⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 405–6, 652n454. Marx had already disavowed his opening section on “The Commodity” in favor of a twenty-page appendix on “The Value-Form,” which he later adapted into what are now the first sections of that chapter. See Karl Marx, “[The Value Form](#),” original appendix to *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867), [www.marxists.org](#); Marx, “[The Commodity](#),” in *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 1 (1867), [www.marxists.org](#).

⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 405–6, 652n454, 518, 524, 526. Engels did a summary of the first volume up to and including the chapter on machinery. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 20, 263–308.

⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 20, 207–37 passim, 238–59.

⁹ ↪ Engels, preface to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1978), 88–102; Engels, 1890 preface to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 115–20.

“science.”¹⁰ What is science but a search for the actualities beneath appearances? The failure to penetrate surfaces in search of the dynamics is Marx’s definition of a vulgar economist.¹¹ Contrary to the accusation that Engels reduced the dialectics of sensuous human activities to the dialectics of nature, he regretted that the Ukrainian Darwinist Sergei Podolinski had gone “astray after his very valuable discovery, because he sought to find in the field of natural science fresh evidence of the rightness of socialism and hence has confused the physical with the economic.”¹²

Those who criticised Engels for his attention to the natural sciences were themselves often math-averse, in contrast to Marx’s fascination with calculus as a method to trace the dialectic of qualitative change.¹³ He strung metaphors and analogies for social processes on threads from the natural sciences. He used (1) triangles to determine the area of a rectilinear figure, illustrating how the value of two commodities can be reduced to a third thing, labor time; (2) molecular structures for the relative form of value; and (3) the ellipse for the metamorphosis of commodities.¹⁴ Marx’s concept of “social metabolism” was inspired by his friend Roland Daniels’s analysis of metabolism in his *Mikrokosmos*, which Marx read in the early 1850s. He was also influenced in this respect by Justus von Liebig’s pathbreaking study of the chemistry and physiology of agriculture, first published in 1840, though it was its seventh edition in 1862 that had the greatest impact on Marx.¹⁵

In this spirit, Marx and Engels had welcomed Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) as an antiteleological prop to their historical materialist account of human existence just as firmly as they deplored Darwin’s mechanical presentation. Engels extended their criticisms to the failure of Darwinians to recognise that cooperation plays as great a part in humanisation as competition does, and the failure to acknowledge the contribution of human labor.¹⁶ From earliest times, divisions—first gender, then class—in labor had come between its planning and execution, a privilege which led to the ascription of “all merit for the swift advance of civilisation...to the mind...and so in the course of time there emerged that idealistic world outlook which...has dominated men’s minds.”¹⁷

Far from Engels leading Marx astray, he rescued him from an unscientific approach to speciation in regard to racial divisions among *Homo sapiens* after Marx had enthused about blood and soil as determinants of culture in Pierre Tremaux’s *Origine et transformations de l’homme et des autres êtres* (1865): “In its historical and political applications [Tremaux’s work is] far more significant and pregnant than Darwin. For certain questions, such as nationality, etc., only here has a basis in nature been found...likewise (he spent a long time in Africa) he shows that the common negro type is only a degeneration of a far higher one.” Engels was aghast: “The book is utterly worthless, pure theorising in defiance of all the facts, and for each piece of evidence it cites it should itself first provide evidence in turn.”¹⁸

¹⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 49, 7. Marx did not say that he was not a Marxist *tout court*; Marx reshaped the French edition of the first volume to assuage his impatient audience. Marx, *Capital*

¹¹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 174–75n34.

¹² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 46, 412.

¹³ ↪ C. Kennedy, “Karl Marx and the Foundations of Differential Calculus,” *Historia Mathematica* 4, no. 3 (1977): 309–12; Karl Marx, *Mathematical Manuscripts* (London: New Park, 1983); Guglielmo Carchedi, “Dialectics and Temporality in Marx’s Mathematical Manuscripts,” *Science & Society* 74, no. 2 (2008): 415–26.

¹⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 127; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 141 (Avogadro’s Number makes the point more generally); Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 198; Thomas Weston, “Marx on the Dialectics of Elliptical Motion,” *Historical Materialism* 20, no. 4 (2012): 3–38.

¹⁵ ↪ Editor’s note: There is a slight change in the text here, in which the reference to Roland Daniels is added, as it is now understood that it was Daniels’s analysis of metabolism in his *Mikrokosmos* that first influenced Marx in this respect. See John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Marx’s Ecology and the Left,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 2 (June 2016): 14.

¹⁶ ↪ Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964).

¹⁷ ↪ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 180.

¹⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 305, 320, 322, 323–25.

Dialectical Reasoning

“And finally, to me there could be no question of building the laws of dialectics into nature, but of discovering them in it and evolving them from it.”

—Engels, preface to *Anti-Dühring*, 1885.¹⁹

No better guide to the logic of Marx’s science exists than that from his closest comrade, who pointed to an error almost as frequent among Marxists as among his bourgeois critics who assume

That Marx seeks to define where he only explains, and that one can generally look in Marx for fixed, cut-and-dried definitions that are valid for all time. It should go without saying that where things and their mutual relations are conceived not as fixed but rather as changing, their mental images, too, i.e. concepts, are also subject to change and reformulation; that they are not to be encapsulated in rigid definitions, but rather developed in their process of historical or logical formation.²⁰

Attentive readers of the first volume would have understood from Marx’s handling of the value-price relation that “the possibility the price may diverge from the magnitude of value is inherent in the price-form itself. This is not a defect, but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.”²¹

Marx applied this explanation only to capitalism. Other modes would operate on different laws, notably the planned economy of socialism, for, as Engels explained: “The so-called ‘economic laws’ are not eternal laws of nature but historical laws that arise and disappear.”²² Moreover, all laws can be seen as tendential.²³ Sensuous human activities are not the phenomenal appearances of eternal, natural, and universal forms, all three being subject to time, manner, and place. That much of this unfolding takes place behind the backs of its human agents underpinned Engels’s antiteleological emphasis on the gap between relative and absolute knowledge:

Here once again we find the same contradiction as we found above, between the character of human thought, necessarily conceived as absolute, and its reality in individual human beings, all of whom think only limitedly. This is a contradiction which can be resolved only in the course of infinite progress, in what is for us—at least practically for us—an endless succession of generations of mankind. In this sense human thought is just as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign and unlimited in its disposition, its vocation, its possibilities and its historical goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual realisation and in reality at any particular moment.²⁴

¹⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 12–13. Hegel makes a similar point in *Hegel’s Logic* (Overland Park, Kansas: Digiread.com, 2013), 120–25, 154, 181–85.

²⁰ ↪ Engels, preface to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 103; compare Engels’s review in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 225.

²¹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 196. In fact, he is speaking of only one mode—the capitalist one.

²² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 136.

²³ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 420–23; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 261, 275.

²⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 80; see also V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 14 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 131–37. Notwithstanding the stance of Engels and Lenin, Soviet authorities often treated *Dialectics of Nature* as “embodying absolute scientific truth.” Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature, Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 5, 121–22, 195, 212–15.

Engels extended his recognition of the untidiness of sensuous human practice to contributions from the otherwise discredited natural philosophers, for example, in his appreciation of Lorenz Oken, who in “his primordial slime and primordial vesicle...put forward as a biological postulate what was in fact subsequently discovered as protoplasm and cell.”²⁵

Similar twists and reversals shadow even our most advanced understanding of the rest of the natural world and our social domains, as Engels warned in that most traduced of his oeuvre, *Dialectics of Nature*, where one essay soars above the provisional character of a posthumous compilation of working notes. In “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man,” criticism of the lopsidedness of Darwinism was wedded to a denial of ineluctable progress: “Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory, nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects that only too often cancel the first.”²⁶

This caution disposes of allegations that Engels imposed “the idea of a linear, rigid, and self-evident time” on historical materialism.²⁷ His review of Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) perceived that “History moves often in leaps and bounds and in a zigzag line.” Echoing Marx, Engels repeated that every advance in our understanding will also be marked by zigs and zags.²⁸ As the champion of the inability of our species ever to gain more than relative knowledge of absolute and ever fluid actualities, Engels was always alert to so-called progress in the sense of hypotheses current among scientists being subject to correction, indeed for being overturned.²⁹

In preparing *Anti-Dühring* (1878), Engels acknowledged that he “had to follow Herr Dühring into realms where at best I can claim only to be a dilettante.”³⁰ From that self-awareness, he would have expected no higher endorsement for his studies in materialist dialectics than that from the Harvard Marxists Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, who dedicated *The Dialectical Biologist*:

*To Frederick Engels,
Who got it wrong a lot of the time
But who got it right where it counted.*³¹

²⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 12n.

²⁶ ↪ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 182.

²⁷ ↪ Richard J. Evans, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 23, 2017, 3.

²⁸ ↪ Engels, review in Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 225. Compare Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 100; *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 362; vol. 50, 265–67; Engels, supplement to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 1036.

²⁹ ↪ Weeks before Engels died, he confessed to Conrad Schmidt that “in Manchester in 1843, I saw the eggs of a duck-billed platypus and, in my narrow-minded arrogance, cast scorn of the folly of supposing a mammal could lay eggs, and now it has been proven! So do not treat the concept of value in the same manner as has obliged me to proffer my belated apologies to the duck-billed platypus!” Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 50, 466.

³⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 8. Jacques Monod alleges that Engels denied the Second Law of Thermodynamics and natural selection. See Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (London: Collins, 1972), 46. The first lie is refuted by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, “Classical Marxism and the Second Law of Thermodynamics,” *Organization and Environment*, 21, no. 1 (2008): 3–37, and the second by reading Engels’s “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man,” *Dialectics of Nature*, 172–86, as well as his powerful defense of Darwin in *Anti-Dühring* (see Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 63–70). See also Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists* (London: Verso, 2012).

³¹ ↪ Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). For other appreciations of Engels, see J. B. S. Haldane, preface to *Dialectics of Nature* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1939); Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1974); John Hoffman, *Marxism and the Theory of Praxis* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), chapter 4; Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: New Left Books, 1975), chapter 3; “The Revolutionary Ideas of Frederick Engels,” special issue, *International Socialism*, no. 65 (1994); “Friedrich Engels: A Critical Centenary Appreciation,” special issue, *Science & Society* 62, no. 1 (1998).

Although Engels made his share of mistakes, he displayed a remarkable ability to absorb difficult theories as well as to link a number of fields of inquiry: anthropology, biology, mechanics, and political economy. His originality sparkles in his contributions to historical materialism: *The Peasant War in Germany*; *The Role of Force in History*; *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*; *Anti-Dühring*; and *The Housing Question*. Marxologists resent Engels because, unlike their costive ruminations, his expositions are sardonic, astute, and the product of one of the best-stocked minds of the nineteenth century. Activists continue to be brought toward Marxism via his writings, notably *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), which had been translated into ten languages by 1885.

Engels's posthumous service to his comrade was to take the blame for everything in Marx that offends the sensibilities of those whom Engels exposed as "shame-faced materialists." Their ilk came in for a lambasting in his "Natural Science in the Spirit World," and when he scorned their speculative philosophising as latter-day theology.³²

Crisis Theory

The Condition of the Working-Class in England (1845) not only exemplified the scientific approach to sensuous human activity that Engels and Marx were to conceptualise shortly afterward in *The German Ideology*, but also projected, most strikingly in the chapter on "Competition," the critical analysis of political economy at a pitch that Marx would not match until 1847 with *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

Out of multiple instances confirming the fineness of Engels's intellect, those most directly connected to Capital are his expositions of credit cycles, and the effects from any cheapening of inputs from more rapid turnovers, especially in foreign commerce. Within certain limits, an emerging money trade, distinct from the exchange of commodities, will

*develop in its own way subject to the special laws and distinctive phases determined by its own nature. If, in addition and in the course of this further development, the trade in money expands to comprise trade in securities, the said securities being not simply government paper, but also the shares of industrial and commercial concerns, i.e. if the trade in money gains direct control of a section of the production by which it is largely dominated, then the reaction of the trade in money on production will be even stronger and more complex.*³³

Finanzkapital took over direction of segments of the production of value, though not in the ways that usurers' capital did in the centuries before value-adding capitals had won dominance.³⁴

Engels introduced a second set of insights when he had to write and rewrite sections of the third volume.³⁵ Here, he indicated the importance of the cost reductions brought about by the shorter times in obtaining and using circulating capital as one result from improvements in transport (for instance, the Suez Canal in 1869) and international communications with the successful laying of submarine cables from 1865. The latter meant that commercial information went from Chicago to Liverpool in minutes, not weeks: "at sea the slow and irregular sailing ship has been

³² ↪ "The little piece about the good Marx being led astray by the evil Engels has been performed countless times since 1844, alternating with the other little piece about Ormuzd-Engels being lured away from the path of virtue by Ahriman-Marx." Engels to Eduard Bernstein, April 23, 1883, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 13; Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 51–62.

³³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 49, 58–59; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, chapter 19.

³⁴ ↪ On the remaking of money-dealing capital with the coming to dominance of the capitalist mode, see Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, chapters 19 and 20.

³⁵ ↪ Engels signed these paragraphs to acknowledge his authorship so that readers of the third volume would be in no doubt about where his editorial interventions began and ended.

driven into the background by the rapid and regular steam ship line.... The turnover times of world trade as a whole have been reduced...and the efficacy of capital involved in it has been increased two or three times and more. It is evident that this cannot but have had an effect on the profit rate.”³⁶ The advances also disturbed underlying trends and potentially postponed economic crises. Similarly, the more rapid turnovers might enable firms to make concessions to organised workers, thereby subverting revolutionary challenges.

Students of credit cycles will concur that Engels’s perceptions have been more than fulfilled. Political economists will

Since the 1980s, all manner of capitalists were overtaken, as Engels put it, by “fits of giddiness” to make money out of money (M-M’) without the bother of selling commodities, let alone organising their production. Money traders led massive speculations in hedging and futures that have burst into a series of monetary crises, including global ones, certain effects of which are still with us.

also note that finance capital’s influence over the whole economy has become more powerful during the last forty years. Since the 1980s, all manner of capitalists were overtaken, as Engels put it, by “fits of giddiness” to make money out of money (M-M’) without the bother of selling commodities, let alone organising their production.³⁷ Money traders led massive speculations in hedging and futures that have burst into a series of monetary crises, including global ones, certain effects of which are still with

us. For instance, investment as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product in the Asian Tigers has stagnated since the currency turmoil of 1997–98, and COVID-19 has held back complete recovery of the world economy.

Quanta and Velocity

To this feast of insights into how capital found new ways to expand, the additions that Engels made to Marx’s drafts show how clearly he sensed transformations in the financial architecture. Their effects were soon to roll through the production process, axiomatically affecting both the labor process and the valorisation process. (Nowadays, the latter is neglected by Marxists in flight from Marx’s concept of value: the key to understanding how exploitation arises in the context of an equal exchange of labor-time for wages.)

Finishing work on the second volume in 1885, Engels had to relate those changes in the financial sector to the depression that began in the early 1870s:

*That crisis...was indeed an exceptional one. The fact is it continues still, all Europe and America suffer under it to this day. The absence of the financial crash is one cause of it. But the principal cause is undoubtedly the totally changed state of the Weltmarkt. Since 1870, Germany and especially America have become England’s rivals in modern industry, while most other European countries have so far developed their own manufactures as to cease to be dependent on England. The consequence has been the spreading of the process of overproduction over a far larger area than when it was mainly confined to England, and has taken—up to now—a chronic instead of an acute character. By thus delaying the thunderstorm which formerly cleared the atmosphere every ten years, this continued chronic depression must prepare a crash of a violence and extent such as we have never known before. And more so as the agricultural crisis of which the author [Marx] speaks, has also continued up to now, has been extended to almost all European countries.*³⁸

³⁶ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 164.

³⁷ ↩ Engels, parenthetical insertion, *Capital*, vol. 2, 137.

³⁸ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 349–50.

We now know that this unprecedented crash did not eventuate. Nonetheless, we can gain insights into the condition of global capital since 2006 by accepting that crises, like every other social action, are subject to changes in how they are manifested. The current one erupted in the financial sector. Devalorisation made inroads into the automobile and steel sectors, increasing their oligopolisation. Yet, debt-to-GDP ratios continue to rise and the bond market is rewriting the rule book.

In 1880, Marx justified his delay in finishing the second volume on the grounds that “certain economic phenomena are, at this precise moment, entering upon a new phase of development and hence calling for fresh appraisal.”³⁹ He demonstrated this spirit of inquiry in the emendations he kept making to the first volume to ensure that masterwork was keeping track of the illogic of capital’s need to expand and keeping up with his own keener understanding. Failure to distinguish phases and stages within the capitalist mode is, as Marx expostulated, “a very rewarding method—for stilted, mock-scientific, highfaluting ignorance and intellectual laziness.”⁴⁰ Dialectical reasoning attends to the new, and is no doctrine of Eternal Return.

Engels, likewise, incorporated post-1870 patterns into his editing of the third and fourth editions of the first volume and when preparing the second and third. By 1894, he had the benefit of observing the sophistication of the stock exchange and banks across the twenty-five years since Marx had drafted his chapters on banking capital.⁴¹ In the last days of his life, Engels returned to problems involved in conceptualising the determination of the average rate of profit:

*But how has this process of equalisation really come about? That is a very interesting point about which Marx himself has little to say. But Marx’s whole way of thinking is not so much a doctrine as a method. It provides, not so much ready-made dogmas, as aids to further investigation and the method for such investigation.... A genuinely historical exposition of this process—which, though admittedly requiring a great deal of research, holds out the prospect of correspondingly rewarding results—would be a most valuable pendant to Capital.*⁴²

As ever, Engels voiced the materialist epistemology in regard to relative knowledge, along with opening the possibility for incremental advances in our understanding: “The history of science is the history of the gradual elimination of that rubbish and/or its replacement by new, if progressively less ridiculous, rubbish.”⁴³

To absorb how the stages of expanding reproduction came into being requires attending to the infrequently opened second volume, with its *tableau economique*. Here the intricacies of the three circuits of capital are tied to the disproportionalities between the production of raw materials and machinery, on the one hand, and the production of commodities destined for personal consumption, on the other. As the quantum of commodities multiplies, so must the volume and/or the velocity of money, thus adding to the risks of a crisis, either from a paucity of the means of exchange, or because a too-ready availability of money-capital feeds the speculative mania.⁴⁴

³⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 46, 16.

⁴⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 43, 527. For a critical commentary of attempts to avoid this failing, see Murray Noonan, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A History* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2017).

⁴¹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 601 n.12, 604 n.4; Engels, supplement in Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 1045–47; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 49, 59–60. See also Engels on the “role of the Stock Exchange which has changed very considerably since Marx wrote about it in 1865.” Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 50, 512.

⁴² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 50, 461–62.

⁴³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 49, 62–63.

⁴⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 215–19; Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 96–98.

The conflicting pressures were well illustrated by the long chain from Britain's return to a gold standard in 1819–21 through the crises of 1825–26 and onto the dispute between the currency and banking schools over who was more to blame for speculative crises: the joint-stock banks or the Bank of England. Victory went to the former with the passage of the 1844 Bank Act, which restricted the fiduciary issue by the Bank to £14 million against securities. By 1847, the export of gold to pay for import of grains necessitated a rationing of credit under the Bank's new charter. The result was a widening depression, alleviated by suspending the limit on the means of exchange. Engels explained how the reversal permitted "the Bank to issue an unlimited sum of bank-notes, irrespective of the extent to which these are covered by its gold reserve; i.e., to create an unlimited amount of fictitious, paper money capital and use this to make advances to the banks and billbrokers, and through them to the world of commerce."⁴⁵ Greater liquidity was sometimes needed to prevent blockages, but it also added to the risks from overheating.

Constant Revolutionising

To extract the maximum benefit from the passages that Engels worked into all three volumes of *Capital* calls for acquaintance with the changes that swept through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the late 1700s, new technologies accelerated social and political forces. This age of inventions is highlighted even if we consider only those related to textiles: the reciprocating engine (1781–84) by a Scot, James Watt; chlorine bleaching (1785) from the French Claude-Louis Berthollet; and the cotton gin (1893) of Eli Whitney, from the United States.⁴⁶ The spread of their nationalities was indicative of an emerging global economy in production and supply chains. Such "hard" technologies were supplemented by "soft" ones, such as a discount market for Bills of Exchange and several hundred country banks after 1780. Both hard and soft technologies had taken effect within the shifting social relations arising out of engrossed agriculture; the concentration and centralisation of processing; an expansion of chattel slavery across the Americas; and consolidations of the second serfdoms in Central and Eastern Europe, the latter being under absolutist regimes (Poland's "Republic of Nobles" excepted), as first identified by Engels.⁴⁷

From about 1830, the microscope supplied evidence that dispelled speculation about living forms, such as spontaneous generation, and broke down rigid categories, allowing Alfred Russell Wallace and Darwin to recognise natural selection as a mechanism for the evolution of species. The overthrow of paradigms in chemistry, geology, mathematics, physiology, and physics stimulated ever more technological advances, none more striking than William Perkin's production of coal-tar dyes in 1857–58, which encouraged Engels to gloat: "If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural phenomenon by bringing it about ourselves, producing it out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then the ungraspable Kantian 'thing-in-itself' is finished."⁴⁸

As these innovations were implemented, several of their medium-term results ran counter to the volume of investment, bringing on episodes of excess capacity in the use of machinery and of raw materials. What Engels called "dislocations" now imposed bouts of added austerity on working people. By integrating the rhythms of booms and busts, Engels became, with Marx, one of the first analysts of economic cycles, tracing new lines of disruption within fresh fields of force.

⁴⁵ ↪ Addition by Engels to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 605n4; for Marx on the follies of the 1844 Bank Act, see chapter 34.

⁴⁶ ↪ Engels offers a coruscating conspectus of their onrush in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin, 1987 [1845]), 53–54.

⁴⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 46, 394–416 passim; vol. 24, 439–56; vol. 26, 341–51.

⁴⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 367.

Fictitious Capitals

Marx made no claim to having coined the term fictitious capital, which Engels used in 1845 to account for how expanding production “has gradually brought the single minor crises nearer together and united them into one periodically recurring crisis.”⁴⁹ Marx’s contribution was the significance that he gave to fictitious capital in his exposition of money and capital.⁵⁰ In the final chapter of the second volume, he integrated the advantages from a regime of credit and futures-trading into his account of the reproduction of aggregate capital on expanding, inevitably uneven scales.

In chapter 25 of the third volume, “Credit and Fictitious Capital,” Engels introduced a form of the “fictitious” that differed from those he placed in chapter 29, where Marx examined capitalised income. Engels began from the 1844 Opium War, which commenced when British businesses were swept into speculation after the opening of China to British cotton goods. A Manchester manufacturer had then asked him: “How can we ever produce too much? We have to clothe 300 million people.” Or, as Engels put it, it was as if “two thousand million new consumers had been discovered on the moon.”⁵¹ He recalled exuberance giving rise to “the system of mass consignments to India and China against advances, which developed very soon into a system of consignments simply for the sake of the advances...which could lead only to a massive flooding of the markets and a crash.” After a time, the sham could be kept afloat, as Engels explained, only by advancing credit even prior to manufacture, and no longer just before sale: “The easier it is to obtain advances on unsold commodities, the more these advances are taken up and the greater is the temptation to manufacture commodities or dump those already manufactured on distant markets, simply to receive advances of money on them.”⁵²

As we have seen, by the 1870s, nearly instantaneous flows of information put an end to this particular “method of creating fictitious capital,” rendering it “completely impossible.”⁵³

That way of cooking the books in the mid-1840s had been a side effect of sectorial overproduction and not an autonomous financial upset provoking a panic. Equally, such turbulence did not need to trigger a general collapse, though one could erupt were contractions in one or more major sector to suppress effectual demand everywhere, despite there being no systemic overproduction at that moment. That spillover was likely to result in a rush to clear those markets too, risking a deflationary cycle. These mechanisms were the subject of the three circuits of capital in the second volume.⁵⁴

The Strategist

We have seen how alert Engels always was to the intersections of science, finance, technology, trade, and production when striving to keep up with the changing expressions of crisis. Given this ability to penetrate to the dynamics of longer-term fluctuations in the reproduction of capital, it is no surprise that his writings on political issues retain significance on matters as seemingly diverse as plundering the wealth of nature, colonialisms and imperialism, nations

⁴⁹ ↪ Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, 117–18.

⁵⁰ ↪ “With the development of interest-bearing capital and the credit system, all capital seems to be duplicated, and at some points triplicated, by the various ways in which the same capital, or even the same claim [on a debt], appears in various hands in different guises. The greater part of this ‘money-capital’ is purely fictitious.” Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 601.

⁵¹ ↪ Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, 118.

⁵² ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 533–34.

⁵³ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 537.

⁵⁴ ↪ Engels offers a guide to reading the second volume; see Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 50, 468–69.

and nationalisms, war, the peasantry, revolutionary socialist organisation, and “the woman question.” His genius was everywhere apparent in how he pursued their cross-linkages. Here we shall consider the last four.

War: Nicknamed “The General,” Engels fought in the 1848 revolution of which he wrote, following it at once with The Peasant War in Germany, a combination typical of his seeking out how elements of the past contribute to transforming the present.⁵⁵ A decade later, he and Marx shared the research for scores of contributions on military matters for the New American Cyclopaedia.⁵⁶

His commentaries on the imperialist wars from the Crimea to Khartoum provided more than ruminations by another armchair correspondent.⁵⁷ From the late 1880s, for instance, Engels tied his frontline analyses to the conflicts in the Hohenzollern court and the French Chamber of Deputies, the skilled labor of German NCOs and officers, the expanding outlays on armaments, and the supply of food during and after a prolonged conflict. Above all, he took up the threat that a European war would pose to a socialist revolution.

Acknowledging that any general conflict “would be a terrible war,” the indomitable optimism of his will, at first, got the better of his uncommon sense to make him confident that “come what may, everything will eventually turn to the advantage of the socialist movement and bring nearer the accession of the working class.”⁵⁸ Nine months later, he accepted that the socialist movement “shall be crushed, disorganised, deprived of elbow-room.”⁵⁹ Indeed,

*a war would set us back by many years. Chauvinism would swamp all else since there would be a struggle for survival.... But there would be some 10 to 15 million combatants in the field...it would mean devastation like that of the Thirty Years War. And it wouldn't be over quickly...and it is quite possible that the postponement of a decisive victory and partial reverses would evoke revolution inside the country.... If the war were fought to a finish without internal disorder, the state of prostration would be unlike anything Europe has experienced in the past 200 years. Then American industry would triumph all along the line.... Hence, I suspect that they do not intend to go to extremes.... But once the first shot has been fired, control will have been lost and the horse can take the bit between its teeth.*⁶⁰

When that shot was fired in Sarejevo on June 28, 1914, the catastrophe came not from a galloping major but in accord with railway timetables.

So alarmed did Engels become that, early in 1893, he took time away from the editing of the third volume of Capital to produce eight articles for the German Party's Vorwarts asking, “Can Europe Disarm?”: “the system of standing armies has been carried to such extremes throughout Europe that it must either bring economic ruin to the peoples...or else degenerate into a general war of extermination.” For disarmament to have an outside chance of success, he was careful

⁵⁵ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 10, 147–239, 397–482.

⁵⁶ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 18, 379–402; W. H. Challoner and W. O. Henderson, eds., *Engels as Military Critic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).

⁵⁷ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 453–510; Wolfgang Streeck, “Engels's Second Theory, Technology, Warfare and the Growth of the State,” *New Left Review* 123 (2020): 75–88.

⁵⁸ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 134.

⁵⁹ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 382.

⁶⁰ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 139.

to “propose only such means as could be adopted by any government of the day without jeopardising national security.”⁶¹

As a strategist, he saw further than Carl von Clausewitz by showing that war was the continuation of domestic as much as of international politics because “the armies are intended to provide protection not so much against the external enemy as the internal one.”⁶² In 1887, Engels had warned that the French Republic “will always be in danger so long as the soldier has his rifle and the working man has not.”⁶³ He saw beyond Napoleon’s maxim that an army marches on its stomach to grasp the impress of a prolonged general conflict on the imbalance of global economic power: “we should all be faced with the alternative either of a complete reversion to agriculture for domestic consumption (any other kind being precluded by American grain) or—social transformation.”⁶⁴

Since battles are always “near-run things,” his commentaries on contemporary armed conflicts could be no more than well-informed guesswork. His prognostications had the advantage, however, of not being coloured by commitment to any of the combatants: “were such a thing possible, one would wish that all should be beaten.”⁶⁵

Peasantries: Engels’s final essay, “The Peasant Question in France and Germany,” appeared in 1894. After some hesitation, he had come around to supporting government help to small farmers, though still preferring their adoption of cooperatives. Family farms had proved more resilient than he had thought possible, often because of their political influence over tariffs. For instance, Otto von Bismarck protected the Junkers against grain imports from the United States after 1870, while Berlin managed the import of more Polish labourers (robota) to work the fields. Engels continued to write about a revolutionary potential among the underemployed rural workforce and dispossessed small farmers, hoping that they could become a reliable backup to urban uprisings. He insisted on delineating strata among the peasants as the essential for a correct political strategy, as did V. I. Lenin in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) and Mao Tse-tung for *The Peasant Movement in Yunan* (1928). All three put the interest of the proletariat front and center when building alliances across classes.⁶⁶

Party building and self-emancipation: Whether in relation to tillers of the soil, to urban wage-slaves, or even rank-and-file soldiers, the goal that Engels pursued in his ceaseless political engagements—including his writings—was a society carried on through collective and state bodies. Under those conditions, he reasoned, economic planning becomes feasible: “From the moment when society enters into possession of the means of production and uses them in direct association for production, the labour of each individual, however varied its specifically useful character may be, becomes at the start and directly social labour.”⁶⁷ With this goal as his lodestar, Engels deplored squabbles within organised labor as harming the movement toward his socialist vision. After failing to prevent a schism in the German Social-Democratic Party, he made it clear that he could not support communist participation in a government dominated by its right wing. Twenty years later, the revisionists led the Party into voting for War Credits. Engels would have sided with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in breaking from the renegade Karl Kautsky.

⁶¹ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 371.

⁶² ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 371–72.

⁶³ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 109–10.

⁶⁴ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 139.

⁶⁵ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 134.

⁶⁶ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 481–502.

⁶⁷ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 366–67.

In keeping with a dialectical-materialist approach to relative knowledge, Engels knew that the lessons from practice would not deprive the movement of the chance to make new blunders: “A large class, like a great nation, never learns better or quicker than by undergoing the consequences of its own mistakes.”⁶⁸ Engels chided while encouraging the French and German Socialists. His antisectarian tone has lessons for the present dispersal of left forces scrambling after an anticapitalist strategy.

Sexual liberation: As a champion for sexual liberation, Engels was not another man telling women how to behave, but affirmed that no one, not even Ludwig Feuerbach and his embrace of free love, could lay down the rules for sexual conduct in a postcapitalist society, any more than bad utopians like Proudhon could draft blueprints for how that economic reordering will be achieved or operate. Rather, Engels endorsed Charles Fourier’s declaration “that in any given society the degree of woman’s emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation.”⁶⁹ Engels accepted that achieving equality before the law is essential toward women’s self-emancipation, but went beyond the liberalism of John Stuart Mill to expose bourgeois marriage as legalised prostitution and an aspect of “the modern individual family...based on the overt or covert domestic slavery of the woman.”⁷⁰ In the Communist Manifesto, he and Marx mocked the bourgeois who “sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.”⁷¹ As fervently as Engels looked ahead to “the possibility of securing for every member of society...an existence guaranteeing to all the free development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties,” he accepted that those transformations will call for newfangled people who will go on remaking ourselves by what we do and how we reconceive those “sensuous human activities.”⁷² As he wrote:

what we can conjecture at present about the regulation of sex relationships after the impending effacement of capitalist production is, in the main, of a negative character, limited mostly to what will vanish. But what will be added? That will be settled after a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have had occasion to purchase a woman’s surrender either with money or with any other means of social power, and of women who have never been obliged to surrender to any man out of any consideration other than that of real love, or to refrain from giving themselves to their beloved for fear of the economic consequences. Once such people appear, they will not care a damn about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion, conforming therewith, on the practice of each individual—and that’s the end of it.”⁷³

Small wonder that second-wave feminists rediscovered *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* as a foundational text for debates among those whose radical politics pitted them against sexism as one more essential for transforming the social order.

⁶⁸ ↪ Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, 45–46.

⁶⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 248.

⁷⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 181.

⁷¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 503.

⁷² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 323.

⁷³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 189.

From the respectful attention that Engels gave to Marx's discoveries, no less than from his own extensions of them in tune with fresh actualities, we learn how to better interpret both evidence and concepts for guiding change toward the communist ideals that Engels had absorbed before meeting Marx in 1844.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the roles that Engels filled as organiser, economist, and polemicist in the development of Western labor movements illumine how we can best honor his memory and his contributions to Capital. In the words of one biographer, Engels "wanted no monument other than the coming socialist revolution."⁷⁵

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Monthly Review
- John Bellamy Foster: [Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism](#)
- John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman: [Capital and the Ecology of Disease](#)
- John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman: [Capitalism and Robbery](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marxism and Ecology: Common Fonts of a Great Transition](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marxism and the Dialectics of Ecology](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marx's Open-ended Critique](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [The Long Ecological Revolution](#)
- Alain Badiou: [The Paris Commune](#)

⁷⁴ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 50, 163–65.

⁷⁵ ↩ John Green, *Engels: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Artery Publications, 2008), 288.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author:** Bruce McFarlane completed this manuscript shortly before his death in 2022, at age 86. McFarlane was a political economist who taught for many years at the University of Adelaide and before that at the Australian National University. He was closely associated on both a personal and intellectual level with some of the leading Marxist (and neo-Marxist) economists, including such figures as Maurice Dobb, Michał Kalecki, and Joan Robinson. He was the author, with E. L. Wheelwright, of *The Chinese Road to Socialism: Economics of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), which contained a foreword by Robinson). He also wrote an important review of Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* for *Monthly Review* (October 1977). For many years, he was a coeditor of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. For more information on McFarlane, see Humphrey McQueen, "A Noble Protagonist of the Proletariat and the Peasantry: A Tribute to Bruce McFarlane," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 2 (2021): 190–206.



❖ **About this paper:** This paper was published in English by *Monthly Review* in September 2023.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Bruce McFarlane: Frederick Engels: The First Marxist? – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, March 2024. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.

❖ **Tags:** Capitalism, Democracy, Biography, History, Marxism, Media Places: Global

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2024, The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org