Being Friedrich Engels

written by Matthew E. Strauss | November 28, 2020

Review of Terrell Carver, *Engels Before Marx* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Friedrich Engels, born 200 years ago on November 28, 1820, has been termed the 'first Marxist' in some commentaries and histories from the nineteenth century on, and with good reason, but despite this, Engels' early works are seldom discussed. There are important exceptions. For example, Michael Roberts, in his newly released treatment of Engels' contribution to political economy, characterizes Engels' early economic work, the *Umrisse* (*The Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy)* as "a brilliant analysis of the ideas of the contemporary economists, exposing their contradictions…[as well as] begin[ning] to develop some of what became the basic categories of Marxist value and crisis theory well before Marx…" (Roberts, 29). First Marxist, indeed.

Terrell Carver stands in the same tradition of centering Engels and does an immense service for contemporary readers with his new book, *Engels before Marx*. Carver wants the reader to imagine what it would be like to be "inside Engels' head, looking out to make an impact, rather than keeping ourselves outside, looking down at him." (5) He concedes that this is an "imaginative exercise", but it is one meant to answer certain questions about the nature of Engels' motivations, intent, and the shape of his work, without the usual reference to his later communist commitments tied to Karl Marx from 1844 on. Carver is quite explicit about this aspect, proposing to exclude, as much as possible, the influence of Engels' later self-portrait as Marx's subordinate, as well as the teleological influences of later biographers, who strove to find the seed of later works in his early literary forays. Carver's approach answers the key questions of what Engels was like before he teamed up with Marx, and what exactly is left, outside of the usual frame of Engels' story. (2) It is important to stress that Carver's treatment of Engels in this work ends at 1844. He does not address the nature of Marx and Engels' partnership, which he has discussed elsewhere, though a careful reader may find an allusion to his earlier views.

Carver has been known in previous works to subscribe to what Paul Blackledge has termed the "divergence thesis." According to Blackledge, Carver is a "prominent proponent of what John Green calls a 'new orthodoxy' that condemns Engels for having reduced Marx's conception of revolutionary praxis to a version of the mechanical materialism and political fatalism against which he and Marx had rebelled in the 1840s." Regardless of where one stands on this debate, it is perhaps a saving grace of Carver's view that he sees Engels as having a more sophisticated view of materialism during the 1840s and, thus, worthy of close study in this book.

The book Carver has written is of pamphlet length, a mere 111 pages, including the references, which range from Marx and Engels' *Collected Works* and *Gesamtausgabe* to recommendations for further reading that include Paul Blackledge, Tristram Hunt, and Gavin McCrea. Its length, however,

belies its deep reading of the world Engels inhabited, not only geographically, but also socially and professionally. The works Engels wrote during this period are described in enough detail to see not only what sources and influences he was working with at the time, but also show what impacts he was aiming to make. Carver's commentary around these descriptions is key to this, and I argue, the deeper point of the book. He does not make broad conclusions at the close of the work, but peppers his commentary throughout the text; the choice is to this reviewer's eyes a far more narratively satisfying one, as it eschews the usual schematic of hard conclusions in other works, though one particular conclusion is implied with the exclusion of Engels' later partnership.

Carver charts Engels' early literary career in a thematic fashion, emphasizing his creative imagination, his observations during his investigations, his vocation in the military and later as writer in the activist community, and finally some reflections on Engels' life on the verge of his joining his energies with Marx; all these themes are key to seeing the construction of his work through Engels' eyes—to almost live the life of ideas that he did.

For the purpose of brevity, we will confine examples of Carver's work to three simple illustrations from the themes given: imagination, observation, and vocation.

As Carver outlines, Engels was "highly imaginative, projecting himself into other worlds via historical narrative and fictional writing, both prose and poetry." (7) This ability to create from within imagined worlds, being able to put himself in multiple different shoes, already foreshadows the kinds of observations Engels will be able to make, as noted in the second theme of the book. As noted above, however, the works themselves are less the point than being able to "look around the edges of the genre and outside the biographical box, even if this requires some exercise of our imaginations" (11), this, in order to picture what life was like from inside Engels' head.

Imagination

One work highlighted by Carver is Engels' "The Bedouin", a ten stanza set of verses which appeared to showcase the orientalism fashionable at the time; a seemingly unremarkable work, in Carver's terms (19). What Carver illuminates is that this was an example of an out-of-date form, the poetic satire. Under Engels' pen, the Bedouin is contrasted with the audience, "who are quite alien." (19) Carver explains that "Engels' view of his poem is that it was expressing contrasting cultures—the faux sophisticates of the audience, with the Bedouin sons of the desert, but as they were when they were home and free, not slaves of civilization." (20) Carver further details that this surviving version, through its complete enclosure in a letter to a friend, was subject to censorious treatment by editors who softened it to the trope of the grief at their [the Bedouins] pathetic appearance on stage" (20) Parenthetical to this discussion, Carver mentions Engels' own self-critique at the work, "for repetition and dissonance, and for lack of clarity in expression." (20)

As one reads of this one case, immediately noticeable is Carver's ongoing commentary, graduating from a short discussion of poetic satire during the early nineteenth century and its suitability for coded political communication with readers, to the commentary on writers like Schiller and the playwright August von Kotzebue, to the discussions of the impact of censors, even on ostensibly literary works. Readers should take note of such commentary, as they are the most outstanding features of Carver's short work. Readers should also be warned that Carver's commentary on Engels himself, and his motivations are there too, and these should be, in this reviewers view, separated and evaluated on their own merits according to the various debates on Engels' motivations and general life story. One example early in the book is Carver's observation that Engels' own later self-portrait was meant to consolidate and define his own work and life within the revolutionary context with Marx, a definition that according to Carver, most biographers have adhered to, whether or not in a conscious way.

Observation

A work explored in the observation thematic chapter, "Letters from Wuppertal", is usually treated, as Carver notes, by "modern editors of Engels' works" as "travel writing"; however, Carver goes on to describe the work according to how the editors of the *Telegraph für Deutschland* would have seen the serialized manuscript: "they introduced the … work to its liberal-minded readers as an expose of a dangerously irrational religious cult which, they said is 'rife' in the German lands…[fitting] the work into the genre that the journal featured, which was liberal-minded commentary." (42)

The work in full represents observations by Engels of the people of the Wupper valley in the context of ongoing industrialization to include pietist religious community, the literary and journalistic scene, such as it was, the educational establishments, including some rather detailed 'rate my professor'-like passages, the character of working people and their employers, as well as the working conditions entailed in the above-mentioned industrialization, a geographical and architectural tour of Barmen and Elberfeld, and small-town boredom and politics.

This dizzying array of subjects covered may seem a daunting research project for anyone, but as Carver notes, it emerged in his view not from carefully detailed source references, but from a mixture of experience, eye-and-ear-witness, and careful research of local publications, most of which aren't referenced in a scholarly manner.

Carver's commentary on this work detail Engels' observational acumen, and his real reasons for writing the work; as Carver has it, "His focus on the industrial sociology of, and human misery of, the twin towns followed from his political focus at the outer edge of liberalizing republicanism. His observations of the "wrong side of town" obviously date from his early experiences as a boy living in the middle of the cloth-works and allied industries…His imagination was self-fed by encounters…with works of romantic, liberalizing subversion. What is really intriguing here is the curiosity and daring of even bothering to notice what young Friedrich evidently took in and ruminated on." (42)

For Carver, Engels work here "seems astonishingly mature…for an eighteen-year-old" and was obviously fostered over years of observation and learning what to look for when making those observations. As for influences, Carver emphasizes that it is "useless looking for [them] to explain this, and…that kind of search represents [a] trope-trap of intellectual biography over and above teleology." (53) Carver again emphasizes the need to retain for Engels, as a subject, his agency in the telling rather than making him an object and effect of his influence(s) (53). For Carver, both sources and influences are less the point for telling the story of how Engels wrote his Letters from Wuppertal; rather, it is important for the reader to "note the way that observation depends on curiosity, and curiosity depends on imagining what to look out for, and then what to make efforts to recollect and write up. Once we are liberated from biographical teleologies we can consider what is going on in the mind that lies behind the subject's eyes." (46)

Vocation and Reflections

Carver's final large thematic chapter features two works, both of which reveal Engels' growing vocation as a writer of politics and political economy. His skills in placing himself in the center of whatever he was writing about and being able to make observations missed even by so many of his contemporaries served him well. As will be apparent to the reader, this final thematic chapter spends less time "looking around the edges of the genre [of biography]", (11) and more time simply summarizing both *Schelling and Revelation*, the *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* and albeit briefly, *The Holy Family*. For example, Carver narrates how Engels was able to craft his *Outlines* through his studies of English economics with the eyes of one who had just had contact

with English and French socialists, as well as those in the Left Hegelian philosophical context. Carver is very careful in his narration to ferret out the fact that not only was Engels the originator of later political economy critiques but was also the lead author of his and Marx's first joint work, *The Holy Family*.

In the final few pages, Carver muses on the "disappearance" (109) of Engels into Marx's shadow, as he "settl[es] into the activist collectives…and political strategies…through which communists…of the day were operating." (107) This reviewer will leave this unsettling conclusion about Engels' independent study and work to others who have studied him more fully, but given the amount of creative imagination, observational acumen, and vocational tenacity Carver uncovers for us by peering around the edges of biography, this conclusion seems both anticlimactic and a bit paradoxical, especially since what he uncovers is what Engels eventually brought to his partnership with Marx. Carver's conclusion may indeed reflect a one-sided judgment of Engels' total eventual textual output as an individual, but as Carver teaches us in this work, there is more than what is written going on here. Carver is very careful to guide us through Engels' life from 1837 to the edge of 1844 and his meetings with Marx, and that guidance is meticulous for such a brief work. This reviewer humbly suggests in this light that everyone, whether they are general readers or seasoned Marxists, should read and consider what Carver has uncovered about Engels' early literary life, and ponder the implications within that for his later partnership with Marx, and afterwards.