

Socialism: Utopian and Scientific

by Friedrich Engels

This pamphlet, first produced in French in 1880, is in fact a compilation of three chapters from Engels' *Anti-Duhring*, a polemical work produced not only to combat the "new" socialist theories of Eugen Dühring but also, more importantly, "an encyclopaedic survey of our conception of the philosophical, natural-science and historical problems" in Engels' own words.

Socialism: Utopian and Scientific condenses some of the key ideas in Engels' book into a concise and very accessible pamphlet, which remains to this day one of the best and most popular summaries of Marxist ideas ever produced. In three brisk chapters Engels deals first with the development of pre-Marxist socialist thought, then dialectical philosophy, which is central to the Marxist method, and finally historical materialism, the application of Marxist thought to the evolution of human society: the source of Marx' and Engels' revolutionary conclusions.

As the very brief synopsis above suggests, this pamphlet is extremely rich in ideas and fully deserves several readings. In addition, Engels' introductions to the pamphlet on "the History of Materialism" and the "History of the English middle-class" which offer both a valuable explanation and defence of materialist philosophy (itself a revolutionary pursuit considering the enormous influence of idealist and agnostic thinking in 'respectable' philosophy), and a masterclass in historical materialism, putting the evolution of philosophy and ideas in its rightful context as part of the underlying revolution in the development of the productive forces and the class struggle.

Chapter 1: Utopian Socialism

The first chapter of Engels' pamphlet is dedicated to the great "Utopian" Socialists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: the forefathers of Marx' and Engels' "Scientific" Socialism.

Providing a brief history of socialist thought from the early-modern era onwards, Engels traces the rationalist, democratic and communist movements of the period not simply as a battle of ideas, but rather of the theoretical expressions of the rise and conflict of newly emerging classes in society. Using the same method, Engels then turns to the first ideological shoots of the new-born working class in Britain and France: the "three great Utopians" of Saint-Simon, Jean-Baptiste Fourier and Robert Owen.

Analysing each of their theories in brief, Engels not only demonstrates the fatal flaws and limitations of their ideal "social systems", but also places them in their historical context, of a class struggle (between the bourgeoisie and proletariat) which was only just coming into being and so, for that reason, still "crude" in its form and expression. This can be seen in the Utopians' eschewing of the working class in favour the "workers" or "people" in general.

However, Engels is by no means dismissive of the great intellectual and political contributions made by these individuals. Engels reserves his sharpest lines for those "Philistines" who "crow over the superiority of their own bald reasoning" over the "grand thoughts" of the Utopians. For Engels, there was much that was correct in their flawed theories, and much which was later inherited by Marx and himself.

Ultimately, from his treatment of the early and Utopian socialists Engels also puts Marxism in its own context as the product both of the theoretical products of earlier socialists, and of the modern proletariat in its full material development.

Study questions

In what sense was the world “stood upon its head” for the 18th century philosophers?

What does Engels mean when he writes, “The great thinkers of the 18th century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch”?

Why were the institutions set up by the “triumph of reason” such “bitterly disappointing caricatures”?

What unites all of the “three great Utopians”?

How does “Modern Industry” make a revolution necessary?

Why were the new social systems of the founders of Socialism “foredoomed as Utopian”?

In what sense is politics “the science of production”?

In what sense was Fourier’s conception of history dialectical?

What similarities can we see between Owen’s philosophy and that of Marx?

What were the limitations of Owen’s Communism?

Chapter 2: Dialectics

The second chapter of Engels' pamphlet focuses on how the history of philosophy culminated with Hegel, from the Ancient Greek philosophers and their less developed dialectics, to metaphysics and onto a Hegelian form of dialectics.

Engels discusses the mistakes of metaphysicians. One pressing issue Engels notes is the inability to understand contradiction. Engels explains that "the two poles of antithesis are as inseparable as they are opposed." This is a key dialectical point drawn out in this chapter. He places this into concrete reality by explaining that nature is proof of this phenomenon.

Engels speaks very highly of Hegel and his brilliance in freeing history from metaphysics. However, Engels also establishes the mistakes of Hegel, due to his idealism, limited knowledge and place in history. Engels comments that Hegel was an idealist and thus saw history upside down.

Engels ends by speaking about Marx. He looks at Marx's materialism, turning dialectics the right way up. He briefly explains capitalist exploitation and then ends by explaining that what Marx did for socialism was change it into a science: "With these discoveries, socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations."

Questions for discussion:

What is dialectics?

What is the difference between the dialectics of the ancients and the dialectics of Hegel?

What is the problem with the dialectics of Hegel?

What did Engels mean when he said that modern materialism “no longer requires the assistance of that sort of philosophy which, queen-like, pretended to rule the remaining mob of sciences”?

Why is Hegel's philosophy important to socialism?

Chapter 3: Historical Materialism

Engels begins this chapter by explaining that understanding material reality is the key to understanding society, that economic reality is the most important factor in determining society, not ideas. This, in essence, is the backbone of historical materialism.

Engels then identifies how capitalism came to be, taking the reader through the change from feudalism to capitalism and thus, the establishment of the modern bourgeoisie. He explains how the means of production were developed, and how the division of labour developed. Here we see a sudden jump into organisation, from the production of goods with the only purpose of need, to the organised factory that produced commodities to sell on the market. Previously, goods had belonged only to the person who made them, as only one person was generally responsible for production. This clear basis for ownership was no longer possible when any commodity was the product of many workers, and so private property came to mean the exploitation of those who worked but owned nothing.

Engels pins down that there must be an end to capitalism; redefining society not as a cycle, but a spiral that returns to previous points, only on a higher level. He goes back to the new and developed means of production, looking at how machinery will develop under capitalism. He speaks of overproduction, and explains why capitalism will overproduce, and more importantly, why this will become a scourge on the existence of capitalist society.

Moving on from this, the pamphlet then gives us an understanding of the state machine: what it is there for, and how it will whither away

under socialism. “The state is not abolished. It dies out”, Engels explains.

Finally, Engels concretely lays out the history of states from Medieval Society to the future Proletarian Revolution. In doing so, he explains the importance of genuine scientific socialism.

Questions for discussion:

What major changes in the division of labour and productive forces have taken place in recent decades, and what political and social changes have been associated with these changes?

How would you apply Engels' observation that “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in men's better insights into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange” to a major social movement of our times, such as the political polarisation across the West?

Engels refers to the arrival of planned production with the *factory system*. Exactly what did he mean by this?

Engels places a lot of emphasis on production of “commodities”. What is a commodity?

Engels mentions a couple of examples of a “vicious circle” in the development of capitalism. What were they?

What does Engels mean by the “rebellion of the productive forces”, and what are the “productive forces”?

Engels says “This solution can only consist in the practical recognition of the social nature of the modern forces of production, and therefore in the harmonizing with the socialized character of the means of production”. How are the forces of production socialised under capitalism?

Engels says: "Active social forces work exactly like natural forces: blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand, and reckon with, them." What is the fundamental reason that social forces are not understood or controlled by humanity? What needs to change in order for them to be understood and controlled?

Which different relations between the State and the community does Engels mention as having arisen down the ages? What could it mean for the state to become "the real representative of the whole of society" and why would it then disappear?