

Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893

Engels to Franz Mehring

Abstract

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Today is my first opportunity to thank you for the *Lessing Legend* you were kind enough to send me. I did not want to reply with a bare formal acknowledgment of receipt of the book but intended at the same time to tell you something about it, about its contents. Hence the delay.

I shall begin at the end — the appendix on historical materialism, in which you have described the main things excellently and for any unprejudiced person convincingly. If I find anything to object to it is that you attribute more credit to me than I deserve, even if I count in everything which I might possibly have found out for myself — in time — but which Marx with his more rapid *coup d'oeil* (grasp) and wider vision discovered much more quickly. When one has the good fortune to work for forty years with a man like Marx, one does not usually get the recognition one thinks one deserves during his lifetime. Then if the greater man dies, the lesser easily gets overrated, and this seems to me to be just my case at present; history will set all this right in the end and by that time one will be safely round the corner and know nothing more about anything.

Otherwise there is only one other point lacking, which, however, Marx and I always failed to stress enough in our writings and in regard to which we are all equally guilty. That is to say, we all laid, and *were bound to lay*, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side — the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about — for the sake of the content. This has given our adversaries a welcome opportunity for misunderstandings, of which Paul Barth is

a striking example.

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought. The ideologist who deals with history (history is here simply meant to comprise all the spheres – political, juridical, philosophical, theological – belonging to society and not only to nature), the ideologist dealing with history then, possesses in every sphere of science material which has formed itself independently out of the thought of previous generations and has gone through an independent series of developments in the brains of these successive generations. True, external facts belonging to its own or other spheres may have exercised a co-determining influence on this development, but the tacit pre-supposition is that these facts themselves are also only the fruits of a process of thought, and so we still remain within that realm of pure thought which has successfully digested the hardest facts.

It is above all this appearance of an independent history of state constitutions, of systems of law, of ideological conceptions in every separate domain, which dazzles most people. If Luther and Calvin “overcome” the official Catholic religion, or Hegel “overcomes” Fichte and Kant, or if the constitutional Montesquieu is indirectly “overcome” by Rousseau with his “Social Contract,” each of these events remains within the sphere of theology, philosophy or political science, represents a stage in the history of these particular spheres of thought and never passes outside the sphere of thought. And since the bourgeois illusion of the eternity and the finality of capitalist production has been added as well, even the victory of the physiocrats and Adam Smith over the mercantilists is accounted as a sheer victory of thought; not as the reflection in thought of changed economic facts but as the finally achieved correct understanding of actual conditions subsisting always and everywhere – in fact if Richard Coeur-de-Lion and Philip Augustus had introduced free trade instead of getting mixed up in the crusades we should have been spared five hundred years of misery and stupidity.

This side of the matter, which I can only indicate here, we have all, I think, neglected more than it deserves. It is the old story: form is always neglected at first for content. As I say, I have done that too, and the mistake has always only struck me later. So I am not only far from reproaching you with this in any way, but as the older of the guilty parties I have no right to do so, on the contrary; but I would like all the same to draw your attention to this point for the future.

Hanging together with this too is the fatuous notion of the ideologists that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any effect upon history. The basis of this is the common undialectical conception of cause and effect as rigidly opposite poles, the total disregarding of interaction; these gentlemen often almost deliberately forget that once an historic element has been brought into the world by other elements, ultimately by economic facts, it also reacts in its turn and may react on its environment and even on its own causes. For instance, Barth on the priesthood and religion on your page 475. I was very glad to see how you settled this fellow, whose banality exceeds all expectations; and him they make a professor of history in Leipzig! I must say that old man Wachsmuth — also rather a bonehead but greatly appreciative of facts — was quite a different chap.

As for the rest, I can only repeat about the book what I repeatedly said about the articles when they appeared in the *Neue Zeit*; it is by far the best presentation in existence of the genesis of the Prussian state. Indeed, I may well say that it is the only good presentation, correctly developing in most matters their interconnections down to the very details. One regrets only that you were unable to include the entire further development down to Bismarck and one cannot help hoping that you will do this another time and present a complete coherent picture, from the Elector Frederick William down to old William. For you have already made the preliminary investigations and, in the main at least, they are as good as finished. The thing has to be done sometime anyhow before the shaky old shanty comes tumbling down. The dissipation of the monarchical-patriotic legends, although not really a necessary precondition for the abolition of the monarchy which screens class domination (for a *pure*, bourgeois republic in Germany has been made obsolete by events before it has come into existence) is nevertheless one of the most effective levers for that purpose.

Then you will also have more space and opportunity to depict the local history of Prussia as part of Germany's general misery. This is the point where I occasionally depart somewhat from your view, especially in the conception of the preliminary conditions for the dismemberment of Germany and of the failure of the bourgeois revolution in Germany during the sixteenth century. If I get down to reworking the historical introduction to my *Peasant War*, which I hope I shall do next winter, I shall be able to develop there the points in question. Not that I consider those you indicated incorrect, but I put others alongside them and group them somewhat differently.

In studying German history — the story of a continuous state of wretchedness — I have always found that only a comparison with the corresponding French periods produces a correct idea of proportions, because what happens there is the direct opposite of what happens in our country. There, the establishment of a national state from the scattered parts of the feudal state, just when we pass through the period of our greatest decline. There, a rare objective logic, during the whole course of the process; with us, increasingly dreary desultoriness. There, during the Middle Ages, the English conqueror, who intervenes in favour of the Provençal nationality

against the Northern French nationality, represents foreign intervention, and the wars with England represent, in a way, the Thirty Years' War, which there, however, ends in the ejection of the foreign invaders and the subjugation of the South by the North. Then comes the struggle between the central power and Burgundy, the vassal, which relies on its foreign possessions, and plays the part of Brandenburg-Prussia, a struggle which ends, however, in the victory of the central power and conclusively establishes the national state. And precisely at that moment the national state completely collapses in our country (in so far as the "German kingdom" within the Holy Roman Empire can be called a national state) and the plundering of German territory on a large scale sets in. This comparison is most humiliating for Germans but for that very reason the more instructive; and since our workers have put Germany back again in the forefront of the historical movement it has become somewhat easier for us to swallow the ignominy of the past.

Another especially significant feature of the development of Germany is the fact that not one of the two member states which in the end partitioned Germany between them was purely German — both were colonies on conquered Slav territory: Austria a Bavarian and Brandenburg a Saxon colony — and that they acquired power *within* Germany only by relying upon the support of foreign, non-German possessions: Austria upon that of Hungary (not to mention Bohemia) and Brandenburg upon that of Prussia. On the Western border, the one in greatest jeopardy, nothing of the kind took place; on the Northern border it was left to the Danes to protect Germany against the Danes; and in the South there was so little to protect that the frontier guard, the Swiss, even succeeded in tearing themselves loose from Germany!

But I am speaking of all kinds of extraneous matter, let this palaver at least serve you as proof of how stimulating an effect your work has upon me.

Once more cordial thanks and greetings from

Yours,
F. Engels

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