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Engels and Marxist Philosophy

GEORGES LABICA

AT THE HEART OF MARXIST THEORY — which is certainly not without difficulties, arising from its evolution, its rectifications, its ambiguities and, above all, its incompleteness — the questions raised by philosophy constitute a key area of contention. Can we speak of a Marxian, or Marxist, philosophy?¹ If such a thing exists, in what does it consist, and in what way is it original? Obviously I do not have the space here to deal with the full scope of such questions. Therefore, I shall limit myself to the role played by Engels in the matter. In so doing, I take as my premise that the question of philosophy is less a matter for an exegesis centered on his work than a question of historical reality; I shall thus focus on the concrete history of Marxist theory or, more precisely, on the elements which, as they appear in Engels, have allowed the construction of a Marxist philosophy — of a philosophy of Marxism, more widely known under the name of dialectical materialism.

I will start with a generally accepted observation: Engels speaks within the context of a silence. This silence, taking into account certain relative exceptions, is that of Marx. After his settling of accounts with the philosophical conscience of the past, which, let us note, applies to Engels as well, since he writes of “our accounts with our consciousness” and of “seeing clearly into ourselves” (Marx, 1977, 4) — that is to say, after *The German Ideology* and above all the *Theses on Feuerbach* — Marx apparently no longer concerned himself with phi-

1 This is the theme of my works Labica, 1976 and Labica 1984; it is the latter work (available in German and Italian, but out of print in French) that I shall be following most closely in this paper.

losophy. He devoted himself essentially to the “critique of political economy,” insofar as its purpose was to inaugurate the “science of history,” historical materialism — a term that was not of his own coinage. He did not write his projected treatise on dialectics. To Dietzgen he wrote: “When I am rid of my economic burden, I shall write a ‘Dialectic’” (Marx, 1868). On the contrary, in the only account that he gives, relative to this subject, of his debt to Hegel, he limits himself to the double metaphor of “overturning” and of extracting the “rational core,” thus bequeathing to philosophy the legacy of a veritable riddle.² Marx maintained a rare discretion on the question of his materialism, for which he provides no definition, with the exception of the famous note in Volume II of *Capital* which evokes “the only materialist, and consequently scientific method,”³ leaving his successors once again with the task of teasing out for themselves the implications of a materialism that would no longer be philosophical. In short, Marx never went to the trouble of formulating, at least in explicit terms, the new, revolutionary philosophy, capable of “changing the world,” upon the ruins, brought about by Marx himself, of those philosophies that confined themselves to its “interpretation.” It is not surprising therefore that one can still detect ambivalence in the title, “Marx, a Philosopher’s Critique of Philosophy,” that Louis Janover and Maximilien Rubel gave to the preface of their recent anthology *Karl Marx’s Philosophy*, an anthology whose “philosophical” texts are, for the most part, extracts from non-philosophical works (JR, 1994; Rubel, 1982).

It is in the context of this silence, then, that, both before and after Marx’s death, Engels speaks. Yet in all probability it is to him that is due the celebrated judgement from *The German Ideology* in all its severity: “Philosophy and the study of the world stand in the same relationship to each other as masturbation and sexual love” (Marx, 1968, 269). After the rejection or abolition of philosophy by Marx, there therefore comes its rehabilitation, on the part of Engels, even if it is to be along the limited lines marked out in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: “All that remains therefore for

2 Postface to the second German edition of *Capital* (Marx, 1978, 29); for the history of the metaphor, see the article “Overturning” in Bensussan, 1985, 992. The letter to Dietzgen, cited above, remarked: “The correct laws of the dialectic are already contained in Hegel; in a mystical form, it is true. It is a question of divesting them of this form . . .”

3 For a discussion of Marx’s materialism, the reader is referred to my study, “Does the Philosophy of Marxism Have a Future?” (Labica, 1985, 2ff).

philosophy, once driven out of nature and of history, is the domain of pure thought, to the extent that such a domain still survives, that is to say, the doctrine of the laws of the process of thought itself, in other words, logic and dialectic" (MEP, 1961, 59).

An initial remark becomes necessary here. The philosophical interventions of Engels are all made as reactions. This is obviously the case with *Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*, known to posterity under the self-explanatory title of *Anti-Dühring*, just as *The Poverty of Philosophy* could have been called *Anti-Proudhon*. After the war of 1870, Dühring, claiming to be a socialist and even praising the Paris Commune, achieved considerable notoriety, thanks to the systematization that he produced in his *Course of Political Economy and Socialism*, published at the end of 1872. His influence grew among the social democrats, certain of whose leaders were his champions, including Most, Bernstein and even Bebel, who did not hesitate to place his book on an equal footing with *Capital* (Bebel, 1874), and Liebknecht, who defended him from the criticisms leveled by Marx and Engels (Liebknecht, 1874). Like Proudhon, Dühring was seen as a "false friend" whom it was right to "tear to pieces" (Marx, 1859) and it was Marx himself who recommended that Engels should set about Dühring "stick in hand" and treat him "without mercy" (Marx, 1876). Engels, then, went on the offensive, albeit under some constraint since he was obliged "to drop everything else in order to set upon the tedious Dühring."⁴ However, no doubt carried away by the mimetic character of his refutation, Engels was led, in opposing Dühring's systematization, to set up his own system to which he was soon to give the name of Marxism.⁵ He would do so also in *Ludwig Feuerbach*, another reaction or response which, eight years later, confirms that of *Anti-Dühring*, in order to popularize, in the form of a serial, initially destined for *Die Neue Zeit* (Engels, 1886) "the new con-

4 Letter to Marx, May 28, 1876. Marx, for his part, wrote to Liebknecht, October 7, 1876: "Engels is busy with his work on Dühring. This represents a huge sacrifice on his part, for, in order to do it, he has been obliged to interrupt an incomparably more important piece of work."

5 In the first preface to *Anti-Dühring* (1878), Engels defends himself from the charge of having opposed system against system: "it is far from the case that the aim of this work is to oppose Dühring's 'system' with another." By contrast, in the second preface (1885), he admits to the contamination: "I was constrained to follow him throughout and to oppose his conceptions with my own. Thus it was that the negative critique became positive; the polemic was transformed into a more or less coherent exposition of the dialectical method and of the communist conception of the world . . ."

ception of the world,” whose “germ,” as he put it, was contained in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (MEP, 1961, 14), which coincidentally he did not take the opportunity to exhume. The fragments traditionally regrouped under the label *Philosophical Letters*⁶ share a similar attitude. They are all replies and clarifications, in response to various inquiries, or in the thick of the fray, as the young Marx put it, concerning the decisive role of economics, ideology and history, and above all, dialectics and materialism. One need look no further for the cradle of what was to become Marxist philosophy.

Before developing this point, however, a further remark is necessary. It seems right that we should not exaggerate the *reactive* nature of Engels’ expositions,⁷ for two reasons. The first concerns “the important piece of work” that Engels had to defer in order to devote himself to *Anti-Dühring*. This was his study of the natural sciences, the collected notes for which were to give rise to the *Dialectics of Nature*, which had been an ongoing project since 1873, and which he would not go on to complete as a result of another urgent commitment, the publication of Volumes II and III of *Capital*.⁸ Engels claimed of this work in progress that it was “of great assistance in the preparation of the Dühring and that it made the task much easier in several respects.”⁹ There is a great deal at stake here: for it appears that it is reflection on the sciences that paves the way for philosophy. Dühring, unbeknownst to himself, provides the necessary transition and negative point of reference. The central piece missing from Dühring’s ambitious synthesis goes by the name of Hegel, whom he is not alone in treating “as a dead dog,”¹⁰ as Marx had already noted. And to speak

6 Also known as the letters of Engels’ late period (MEP, 1961). The letters concerned are to Schmidt, Bloch, Borgius and Mehring.

7 I myself did not completely resist this temptation in my *Marxism-Leninism* (Labica, 1984).

8 Cf. the second preface to *Anti-Dühring*. “Since Marx’s death, my time has been required for more pressing duties and I have had to interrupt my work.”

9 Letter to Marx, May 28, 1876, already cited. Engels adds: “As for this task too [*Dialectics of Nature*] I am beginning to glimpse the end of my labors.” See also the letter to Marx of May 30, 1873, in which Engels states in broad terms the plan of his “dialectical ideas . . . on the natural sciences.”

10 “Even what Lange says about the Hegelian method and my use of it is truly puerile. First of all, he does not understand the Hegelian method at all and even less does he understand the critical fashion in which I apply it. In a way he reminds me of Moses Mendelssohn; that archetype of the tedious chatterbox wrote to Lessing one day to ask how he could possibly take seriously ‘that dead dog Spinoza.’ In the same way, Mr. Lange is surprised that Engels, myself, etc., should take that dead dog Hegel seriously, when people like Büchner, Lange, Dr. Dühring, Fechner, etc., are in agreement in saying that they buried him long ago — poor dear” (letter to Kugelmann, June 27, 1870). See also the letter to

of Hegel is to speak necessarily of dialectics. These were to be the two principal protagonists of *Anti-Dühring*, and not materialism, which Dühring prided himself on professing.

The second reason concerns the need to take into consideration Marx's own interest in these questions. For Marx not only encouraged and approved Engels in his trouncing of Dühring, but also steadfastly shared his passionate interest in the sciences and frequently discussed them with him. As Jean-Pierre Lefebvre points out, in his Introduction to *Marx Engels Letters on the Natural Sciences*, Marx was preoccupied during the 1850s with physics, cosmology, geology and physiology, while Engels set about acquiring a mathematical education and took over from Marx in the sphere of science in the 1870s (MEL, 1973, 9). Both of them were fascinated by all that was new: Darwinism, evolution, the progressive mathematization of scientific techniques. They gave their support to the small number of scientists who steered clear of idealism and religious ideology, such as Carl Schorlemmer, who had made favorable comments on Engels' plan for the *Dialectics of Nature* (*ibid.*, 77). In the obituary for Schorlemmer that he wrote for *Vorwärts* in July 1892, Engels praised him for having had no hesitation in "joining the school of Hegel," and he went on to add that Hegel's crucial contribution, including for the sciences, was the concept of evolution (*ibid.*, 123). (Unfortunately the correspondence between Engels and Schorlemmer has not been discovered.) The relationship of Engels to Hegel was a long-standing and complex one.¹¹ At the beginning of 1865, in a letter to F. A. Lange, Engels insists on the quality of Hegel's mathematical knowledge as recognized by Marx. He accepts that there are "stupid mistakes" in his philosophy of nature, but goes on to insist that "his true philosophy of nature appears in the second part of the *Logic*, in the theory of Essence, which is the fundamental core of the entire doctrine," and he concludes: "I am of course no longer a Hegelian, but I still have profound respect and a sense of attachment to the old colossus" (Engels, 1865). Such a relationship was by no means unlike that

Kugelmann, March 6, 1868, in which Marx points out that Dühring's *Natürliche Dialektik* is directed against Hegel's dialectic and repeats that "Hegel's dialectic is the fundamental form of every dialectic, but only once it is divested of its mystic form . . ."

11 Cf., for example, the account of Alexei Vodenko who, in his "Interviews with Engels," recounts: "When I brought up Riehl's mockery of Hegel's philosophy of nature, he became animated and gave me a lecture on the philosophy of nature in which he showed what a rich wealth was hidden in the dense, obscure formulations of Hegel" (ME, 1982, 1927).

of Marx himself to Hegel. Indeed it is echoed in Marx's own comments on the question of mathematics (Marx, 1866). The example given in *Anti-Dühring* using the integral calculus, often characterized as "unfortunate,"¹² is derived in all probability from Marx who refers to "the negation of the negation," third law of the dialectic, in his *Mathematical Manuscripts*, in relation to the differential calculus.¹³ In a letter to Engels of June 22, 1867, Marx evokes "Hegel's discovery concerning the law of the sudden commutation of the purely quantitative change into a qualitative change, as being equally verified in history and in the natural sciences." He professes how closely he is following the work in which Engels is engaged.¹⁴ The match between Marx's project of writing a "Dialectic" and Engels' projected "Dialectic of Nature" is no mere coincidence.

Let us leave this matter here and turn to the consequences of Engels' philosophical interventions, since he has been held largely, if not solely, responsible for them, and since his *Anti-Dühring*, whose print run was one of the largest of any of the works of the two founders, went on to serve as the absolute point of reference, or in other words, the origin of Marxist philosophy. The first consequence, both chronological and theoretical, is the retention of the idea of a system, which is perhaps the paradoxical price to be paid to Hegel and — to Dühring. Engels paved the way for this, when he wrote, in *Ludwig Feuerbach*:

It was decided to examine the real world — nature and history, as it presents itself to whoever approaches it without any preconceived idealist fancies. . . . In truth, materialism means nothing more than that. It was simply that, for the first time, the materialist conception of the world was really taken seriously, and was applied in a coherent fashion to all the accepted domains of knowledge — in broad terms, at least.

Twenty years later, Lenin insisted: "One cannot remove any fundamental principle, any essential part of the philosophy of Marxism,

12 This judgement comes from Manuel Sacristan (1964), in his Introduction to his translation of *Anti-Dühring*. The passage in question can be found quoted in the French edition, page 164: "The mathematics of variable quantities, of which integral calculus forms the major part, are essentially only the application of dialectics to mathematical relations."

13 Alain Alcouffe in his presentation of *The Mathematical Manuscripts of Marx* demonstrates that the *Manuscripts* cannot be understood without reference to Hegel's *Science of Logic* (Marx, 1985, 115).

14 "My friend Engels is currently working on a book on the philosophy of nature [*naturphilosophisch*]; the ambiguity of the German formula should be noted (Marx, 1877).

cast as it was from a single block of steel" (Lenin, 1962, 339), and recognized that "it is impossible to understand Marxism and to give a complete exposition of it without taking into account the entire work of Engels" (Lenin, 1914, 87). Lenin reiterated the point: "It was entirely natural that Marx and Engels should direct assiduous attention not to the repetition of what had already been said, but to the serious development of materialism, to its application to history, that is to say, to the full completion of the edifice of materialist philosophy" (Lenin, 1962, 252). Brecht, in turn, and in his own direct way, hit the nail on the head when he said: "Master Eh-Fu [Engels] took the principles that the bourgeoisie had drawn from its revolution and had applied to the observation of nature and to logic, and passed them on to the workers, to the advantage of their revolution" (Brecht, 1968, 115).

All the terms are in place: materialism taken seriously, embracing nature and history, completion, application, philosophy of Marxism. Such terms would weigh heavily. Lenin, although aware that the system was not completed, was convinced that it contained all the elements authorizing its completion and application. The proof is that he himself set about the task. He embarked upon it right from his first major work, *The "Friends of the People" and Their Struggle Against the Social-Democrats*, in 1894, a year before Engels' death. His procedure was perfectly clear and merits notice. Lenin worked from a single database, to use a contemporary expression, and it was one that he would continue to consult throughout his life. In the field of philosophy, which was by no means his principal domain, Lenin was a reader of Engels. He even proceeded in the same manner as Engels, in other words his interventions were reactive. In a further similarity, just as Engels had done for the *Dialectics of Nature*, Lenin, towards the end of his life, filled up his notebooks with remarks which, far from surprisingly, concerned Hegel — in particular, the theory of Essence from the *Science of Logic*, and the natural sciences (Lenin, 1971). If Engels had had to suspend his projects on two occasions, because of *Anti-Dühring* and *Capital*, Lenin too had to abandon his project on account of the revolution. Might one add that he too felt regret for a treatise on dialectics that he was never to write? As he said: "The dialectic is precisely the theory of knowledge [of Hegel and] of Marxism" (Lenin, 1971, 279–282).

Thus it was that Lenin knocked upon the right door, the only one that was open, and took the only road already marked out, fol-

lowing in the footsteps of Engels. Marx, as he knew, could provide no help. He could not be his guide on the path that he must climb, except to point out a few scattered landmarks (cf. in the *Notebooks*, the summary of *The Holy Family* and a few allusions to *Capital*). *The "Friends of the People"* was presented in explicit terms as a response to the "deformations" inflicted on Marxism by the populists and "legal Marxists." Lenin encountered his Dühring in the person of N. Mikhailovski, who himself referred to *Anti-Dühring* and its principal protagonist. The parallel is clear between Engels' own demonstration and that of Lenin reading Engels.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Lenin, wishing to clear Marxism of the charge leveled at it by Mikhailovski of relying on "the absolute character of the dialectic," reduced to the form of "Hegelian triads," endeavored to play down the role of the dialectic, which he refers to simply as "the scientific method in sociology," and thus to play down the influence of Hegel, limiting himself to a mention of Marx's flirtation with him. The situation of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, in 1908, followed a similar format. The moment was that of a crisis which, after the failure of the 1905 revolution, swept through the ranks of the Bolsheviks themselves, "a grave crisis internal to Marxism," as Lenin (LCWb, 37) put it, for which philosophy, for the first time, was to provide the designated arena.¹⁶ Lenin, who defended his competence in philosophy (Lenin, 1908, 395) — just as Engels had done before him, proclaiming himself to be a "Doctor" (Engels, 1842) — saw himself all the more driven to counter-attack, in that the necessary clarification of positions in the sphere of philosophy governed the pursuit of the political struggle. Once again Lenin as reader of Engels reappears. Engels is cited six times in the "Ten Questions to the Speaker" that precede *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, in which he is present on virtually every page. With the main substance of the debate focusing on the question of Marxist philosophy and on the role of Engels in person, Lenin insists from the start: "No-one can be ignorant of the fact that Marx and Engels described on numerous occasions their philosophical conceptions as deriving from dialectical materialism."¹⁷ Once again, and more

15 I have traced this parallel in detail in "Materialism and Dialectics," in Labica, 1977, 191ff.

16 I have given an extended analysis of this moment in Labica, 1974, 49ff. I can only give a very brief summary here of that analysis; see also Althusser, 1969.

17 Preface to the first edition of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (Lenin, 1962, 15); Lenin gives the names of Bazarov, Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, Bermann, Hellfond, Iushkevitch, Suvorov and Valentinov.

than ever, it was a question of defending materialism in the face of its infiltration, whether explicit or covert, by idealism, by its variants in empiriocriticism and in philosophical neutrality. Lenin elaborates a veritable typology of forms of materialism, culminating in “completed materialism” or “materialism plain and simple.” Engels is consistently invoked by the expression “the materialist Engels,” the works most frequently cited being *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach* (Labica, 1977, 216ff). His adversaries are accused of denying his presence, “for fear of having to face him in open battle.”

The central thesis of the completion of materialism is sustained by Lenin on the basis of the following argument. Marx, after his “exit” from philosophy, busied himself with developing the “historical side,” that is to say “the science of history” which represented the process of appropriation of the entirety of human practice by materialism. One cannot minimize Engels’ contribution to historical materialism (most notably in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*); nevertheless, it is fair to say that he focused his efforts on dialectical materialism, by insisting on “the dialectical side,” the widespread neglect of which was responsible both for the regressions towards metaphysics (Dühring) and for the seductions of economism (Bloch, Borgius, etc.). Now the dialectic, once Hegel has been “overturned,” signifies nothing else but materialism. The priority granted to the materialist “side” as against the dialectical and historical “sides” forms the “essence” of materialism which, in order to be brought about, must of necessity integrate the dialectical and the historical. The science of history and the materialist dialectic amount to the same thing. Lenin maintained this analysis when he recommended, in his *Notebooks*, that Hegel should be “read as a materialist,” and, in “The Significance of Militant Materialism,” in 1921, when he argued for the creation of “an association of materialist friends of the dialectic.” Here is not the place to dwell, except in passing, on the oscillation, apparent throughout the history of Marxism, between materialism (Feuerbach) and dialectics (Hegel), and on the overall problematic presented by Lenin’s interventions into philosophy (*ibid.*). Suffice it to say of Lenin’s role that it consists, to all intents and purposes, in a construction, and that he situates himself, notwithstanding certain abrupt and contradictory formulations, within the silent spaces left by Engels and, even more so, by Marx.

It is useful to recall, at this point, that after the deaths of the two founding fathers and still at the time when Lenin was forging his initial theoretical weapons, the question of the construction of Marxist philosophy remained an open one. Marxists were conducting debate in every sphere, with feverish intensity, as if they felt a sense of incompleteness and sometimes a sort of void. This was true in the case of Antonio Labriola and Georgy Plekhanov, both former correspondents of Engels, who engaged each other in debate over the nature of the materialism that had been bequeathed to them, in the final years of the 1890s. One had just published, in Italy, his *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* (Labriola, 1928) which Lenin judged “excellent” and which he wanted to be translated into Russian (LCWc), the other responded to him in his *The Materialist Conception of History* (LPW2, 229–264). Intervening again, each from his own side, in the first crisis of Marxism provoked by the work of Masaryk, *The History of Socialism and Marxism*, Labriola published in 1899 *On the Crisis of Marxism* and Plekhanov *Concerning Masaryk’s Book*, in 1902. Despite their common interests and relatively similar approaches, their views are scarcely in agreement. To put it briefly,¹⁸ Plekhanov opted for “dialectical materialism,” though this did not prevent him from drifting towards Kantianism (Lenin levels this charge against him at the beginning of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*) in his polemic against Conrad Schmidt, while Labriola, who had already expressed his misgivings to Engels over the word “dialectics,”¹⁹ chose “historical materialism,” or as he tended to refer to it, “critical materialism.” According to Plekhanov, “historical materialism is one of the domains studied by dialectical materialism.” For Labriola, the ambition is of a more limited scope: “Philosophy is then either a generic anticipation of the problems that science has yet to specifically elaborate, or a summary and conceptual elaboration of the results that the sciences have already produced.” Karl Kautsky, who in his *Neue Zeit* (in which Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach* had appeared) had defended the Marxists’ need for freedom of opinion in the sphere of philosophy while they, conversely, remained tied by economic theory, wrote, on June 10, 1898, to Eduard Bernstein, who for his part was fully engaged on the path of “revisionism”:

18 A more complete account is given in Labica, 1979.

19 He declared his preference for the term “genetics,” not in order to contest the analysis of contradictions, but because of the rhetorical connotations of “dialectics” (Labriola, 1964).

It would be a great disappointment to us if you left off your interrogation of the former theory at the stage of the prolegomena. You have thrown overboard our strategy, our theory of value and our philosophy. Everything depends now on what you plan to put in the place of the former doctrine.

Conrad Schmidt, recipient of some of Engels' most famous "philosophical" letters, sided, for his part, with Kantianism. Such a spectrum of attitudes (and there were others, such as that of Benedetto Croce) is sufficient to give an idea of both the disarray in the face of the incomplete character of Marx's legacy in philosophy, and the scattered attempts at construction. Lenin himself took care, after the revolution and right up to his death, not to impose any doctrinal orthodoxy. He contented himself with certain firm materialist recommendations following upon his book of 1908, while around him there continued the open controversies between philosophical adversaries, the "dialecticians" (followers of Deborin) and the "mechanists" (for an overview of this history, see Labica, 1984, 26ff).

The true turning point, which would bring about the birth of Marxism–Leninism and the imposition of an official philosophy, took place under Stalin, from 1929 onwards. The celebrated and millionfold distributed pamphlet by Stalin, *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism* (1938), in the course of some 30 pages, confirmed its consecration. The *Little Philosophical Dictionary* of M. Rosenthal and P. Ioudine (RI, 1955) presents the pamphlet in the following terms:

A systematic and complete statement of the fundamental principles of Marxist philosophy. A philosophical synthesis. . . . This summation of the precious philosophical inheritance bequeathed by Marx, Engels and Lenin demonstrates the indissoluble link which unites dialectical materialism with proletarian socialism, and the practical revolutionary importance of Marxist–Leninist philosophy. Dialectical materialism is the Communist Party's conception of the world, the Marxist party's theoretical foundation of a new type.

Stalin himself declared in 1906: "Marxism is not only a theory of socialism; it is a complete conception of the world, a philosophical system out of which there naturally arises Marx's proletarian socialism. This philosophical system is called dialectical materialism" (Stalin, 1950, 7).

Once again, we are confronted with an intervention, which displays the two characteristics already remarked upon. Stalin too appears as a reader of Engels. It is Engels whom he cites most frequently and most extensively — ten times, independently of his association with the name of Marx, in the section devoted to dialectical materialism alone (*Anti-Dühring, Dialectics of Nature, Ludwig Feuerbach*).²⁰ Lenin is cited less, but put forward as the authority who guarantees the truth and validity of the exposition, as in the concluding lines, before the mention of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*: “Thus one sees what a theoretical treasure Lenin has safe-guarded.” The patronage of Lenin was a constant throughout Stalin’s life: “always in agreement with Lenin” was the leitmotif of his (official) biographies (HM, 1969; Marcou, 1966). Significantly, Chapter IV of the *History of the Communist Party of the USSR* is given over to the period 1908–1912, viewed as a time of crisis, as we have seen. Yet this period is presented as emblematic of the period of the 1930s, the aim of the analogy being to give Lenin’s sanction to the triumph of Stalin’s policies and power, including the purges and liquidations. That is to say that once again, but on an unprecedented scale, since the new dogma is spread across the globe, philosophy does not speak for itself, but is pressed into the service of the State–Party, whose consecration it is required to affirm. The General Secretary is alone invested with the right to pronounce theory, just as he dictates policy to the entire international Communist movement. From this point there is nothing further to be added to Marxism–Leninism, or rather to “Diamat,” a complete and universal system, presupposing as it does the construction of Leninism (Labica, 1984, 78), except the repetition of the official dogma, with its decrees and catechism. The French Communist Party, nurtured on a scientific tradition, was quick to climb aboard (Labica, 1987, 164–181), as witness the apologetic presentation of the *Dialectics of Nature*, “Friedrich Engels’ work of genius,” by G. Cogniot, at a conference before an audience of scientists (Cogniot, 1953). He denounced “the attempt of the obscurantists,” from Bernstein to Blum and from Riazonov to Merleau-Ponty, “to separate Marxism and

20 Cf. also the Preface, written by the Marx–Engels–Lenin Institute of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of the USSR, for the edition of the *Dialectics of Nature*: “In *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*, Stalin has given an unequalled exposition of the philosophical basis of Marxism and has developed it further. In it he often refers to Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* and *develops and concretizes Engels’ principles . . .*” (emphasis added).

philosophy.” Between the program of enquiry into the natural sciences engaged by Engels (and Marx), and the propositions of Lenin on the historical dialectic and the oneness of materialism, culminating in Stalin’s *Diamat*, Marx’s thought was transmuted into ecclesiastical dogma, into an intangible truth subject to revelation. Without further consideration, Marxism–Leninism went on to be accepted, at worst as coextensive with Marxism, at best as the combined work of Engels and Lenin. Any question of continuity and any considerations of nuance were jettisoned when it came to the role of the fourth protagonist, the mastermind whose name was to remain concealed, first and foremost by himself — with the exception of the little used formula “Marxism–Leninism–Stalinism” (on “*Diamat*” the reader is referred to Tosel, 1977).

The consequence can henceforth be pronounced in all clarity: it is Engels who is the culprit! Engelsism, under the guise of anti-Engelsism, came to represent, in the eyes of those who wished to repudiate the doctrine described directly above, the common denominator of the various forms of contestative Marxism, or, as I have elsewhere called it, “underground” (Labica, 1984, 124) Marxism, to differentiate it from the dominant, orthodox vulgate. At the same time, Engelsism came to constitute — for those who have prejudged the matter; *i.e.*, for those who trace a line back from Stalin to Marx — the principal grounds for the global rejection of Marxism. I shall limit myself here to indicating certain landmarks in this concrete history of Marxist theory, which would benefit from a strictly chronological study focused in different national contexts and which would require, for its full elaboration, a collective work of several volumes, since it is coextensive with the development of Marxism over the last 50 years (see also Vranicky, 1971; *Storia del Marxismo*, 1978; *History of Contemporary Marxism*, 1976; Tosel, 1974; and the overly ideological Kolakowski, 1987).

It is necessary to make certain distinctions. The first current of thought, and the most radical one, is that of the partisans of exclusion. This is represented, in France, most notably by Maximilien Rubel and Michael Henry (RH, 1976). Along the same line, Schmidt (1969) sees an incompatibility between Marx’s thought and Engels’ version of it. Their aim is to expurgate from Marxism all trace of the presence of Engels. The second current of thought is that of the case for the prosecution. This includes all those, of whom there are many, who, on

various grounds and with more or less rigor, have put Engels on trial, or have taken him as their target, with the evidence appearing to support them. To mention the first of a few illustrious examples, this is the case of several of Gramsci's remarks (see also Labriola, *op. cit.*). Gramsci, following the 1912 publication of Rodolfo Mondolfo's book, *Materialismo storico di Federico Engels*, brought up the question of the need for a separate study of "the two founders of the philosophy of praxis" (Gramsci, 1977, 95–96). In the long critical analysis that he devoted to Bukharin's work, *The Theory of Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*, which he generally refers to by the name of *Saggio popolare* and whose debt to Engels he clearly perceives, despite the fact that he declares, with reference to Lukács' thesis limiting the dialectic to human history, "that he may be wrong and he may be right," Gramsci was quick to add that, by pushing things in the opposite direction, Lukács ran the risk of falling into the inverse error of idealism (*ibid.*, 179). A similar charge was leveled against Gramsci himself, on the grounds of his historicism (Labica, 1992, 22ff). J. P. Sartre, drawing on a quotation from Engels that he attributes to Marx,²¹ writes:

what we are dealing with is a system of ideas contemplated by a pure consciousness, which has already established their law for them, while remaining unable to give any foundation to this law. . . . Engels accuses Hegel of imposing the laws of thought upon matter. Yet this is precisely what he himself does when he calls upon science to verify a dialectical reason that he has discovered within the social world. (Sartre, 1960, 126, 128.)

Gramsci, Lukács, Sartre, and in addition Korsch (1964), Merleau-Ponty (1955) and Lucien Goldmann (1959),²² along with many others making up underground Marxism, see in positivism and scientism the principal pitfalls of Engels: from nature to history, the consequence is not a good one and the "laws" of the dialectic, caricatured, it is true, in their Stalino-Zhdanovian form, become the object of assault.

21 "This materialism [*i.e.*, "transcendental dialectical materialism"] is not, as we well know, that of Marxism, and yet it is in Marx that we find the definition of it: 'The materialist conception of the world means simply the conception of Nature as it is, without any alien addition'" (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*; Sartre, 1960, 124). Sartre had already given the same quotation in "Materialism and Revolution" from 1946, in *Situations III*; he had however replied to Maximilien Rubel that the quote was indeed from Engels; cf. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 32. The quotation comes from *Ludwig Feuerbach . . .*, *op. cit.*, 68.

22 The first two essays on dialectical materialism, 1947. Goldmann is to a large extent atypical in that he visibly assimilates dialectical materialism with historical materialism, before going on to endorse the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*.

A third current of thought, this time of Latin origin (evidently due to a more historicist tradition than that in France), chose, particularly in the 1960s and 70s, to take seriously the problem presented by Engelsism, by conferring upon it the status of a subject requiring a double examination, at once theoretical — *i.e.*, internal to Engels' thought — and historical, with respect to the contextualization of this thought. The debate was launched by the publication of Lucio Colletti's book, *Marxism and Hegel*, in which Engels' "naiveté" is blamed for the "pure and simple adulteration of Marxism by the idealist dialectic," for the return to speculation and to the conception of philosophy as *scientia scientiarum* (Colletti, 1971, 99ff). We note, in passing: it is surely no coincidence that this author, along with his critics, such as Nicola Badaloni (1970, 930) and Giuseppe Prestipino (1976, 236), returns to the reading of Lenin's *The "Friends of the People"*, which he describes as an "admirable" piece of writing (150). Prestipino denounces a "Western-Marxist" reading (Lukács, Korsch, Schmidt, Gramsci),²³ whose common failing is to assimilate the concept of science with the concept of labor, despite their being different, for in the relationship of science to labor the terms of the relationship between labor and "primary matter" find themselves inverted.

Despite the interest of these reflections which can only be alluded to here (*e.g.*, Timpanaro, 1970; Luporini, 1974), I shall focus my attention on an approach which strikes me as exemplary and less well known. The example is that of Manuel Sacristan's Preface (1964) to his translation of *Anti-Dühring*. Sacristan delivers the following severe indictment of the whole of Engels' enterprise: "an incorrect application of the dialectic"; the extension of Hegelian concepts into areas which do not concern them; "the unjustified incursion of the dialectic into the terrain of positive science, by means of a verbal application, at the level of abstract and reductive analysis"; "an epistemologically regressive attitude" in contradiction with the basic principles of Marxism. In opposition to Engels' "overly vague" definition of the dialectic, Sacristan offers that of Lenin: "the concrete analysis of a concrete situation." The point is important, for it allows one to recognize the double distance maintained by Lenin's 1894 text with

23 The expression "Western Marxism," coined by Merleau-Ponty, in *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, and which broadly corresponds to my use of "underground Marxism," is taken up by Perry Anderson in his suggestive but controversial essay, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976).

respect to that of Engels, for all their similarities: the setting aside of Hegel by Marx and the priority attributed to history — “the historical dialectic.” Louis Althusser would make a similar observation when he underlined Lenin’s superiority to Engels.²⁴ Sacristan notes all the same that, although the weaknesses of Engels’ conceptions, in *Anti-Dühring* and the *Dialectics of Nature*, explain a certain dismissive attitude, particularly among the existentialists and neo-positivists, they do not justify the conclusion that Engels was responsible for the elaboration of “an encyclopedia of Marxism.” The construction of a Marxist philosophy was imposed by the development of the theory and by “the relation of the workers’ movement to its classics.” “Lazy” habits of reading have been reinforced by the struggles against “revisionism” which, at each historical stage, have consecrated the development of the founders’ work. The need for dissemination gave rise to the simplifications of Stalinism.²⁵ Engels’ works on the natural sciences, whose aim, Sacristan (1984, 300) recalls, was a “modest” one, provided, in this sense, the “point of departure” for Diamat, that hybrid of mechanistic materialism and idealism.

Thus, once one takes into account the division of labor between Marx and Engels and the fact that Engels only shielded *The German Ideology* from critical attack for the precise purpose of dissemination, the liberation of Marxism from “dogmatic and clerical reading” ceases to be a question of liberating it from Engelsism. J. M. de Freitas Branco (1989), in a fine, thought-provoking book whose object is to establish what Engels “really said” (*ibid.*, 28), shares Sacristan’s point of view. He reconsiders the terms and the protagonists of the debate: “the attacks mounted against Engels display a characteristic that can be considered invariant: . . . anti-materialism” (*ibid.*, 259), despite the fact that “materialism is historical to the extent that it is dialectical and dialectical to the extent that it is historical. This was not under-

24 *Lenin and Philosophy* (Althusser, 1969), followed by *Marx and Lenin before Hegel* (1972, 32–37), although Althusser considers that at the moment of writing of *The “Friends of the People”* Lenin “clearly had not read Hegel” (*ibid.*, 77). Roger Garaudy (1968) put forward the same view in his *Lenin*, and went on to conclude from it the immaturity of the young Lenin (cf. Lukács, “Materialism and Dialectics,” *op. cit.*, 206ff); see also Nicola Badaloni, *op. cit.*, 109 on Althusser’s thesis.

25 “Whatever consequences are damaging to Marxism are less imputable to Engels than to the vicissitudes of the workers’ movement and the construction of socialism in the USSR.” Gramsci made a similar remark concerning the vulgarization of Engels as being destined for the popular masses, “for whom there is still necessary the conquest of formal logic, and of the most elementary grammar of thought and language” (*Materialismo storico, op. cit.*, 73).

stood by Stalin and the Soviet philosophers, but it was by Engels" (*ibid.*, 261). De Freitas questions the very notion of there being an Engelsism (*ibid.*, 39, 253ff). Engels inaugurated a new way of doing philosophy — "thinking dialectically." He should be in no way held responsible for "the calamitous separation between dialectical materialism (associated with the phenomena of nature) and historical materialism (associated with society)" (*ibid.*, 261).

At the end of this rapid survey, is it possible to draw any final conclusion? Despite the pertinence of certain criticisms and the validity of certain textual considerations, it seems legitimate to emphasize the following factors. First, it should be recalled that Engels applied caution in all his philosophical interventions, in particular with respect to the natural sciences. This caution rested not only upon his awareness of his own limitations, which he continues to evoke in his 1885 Preface to *Anti-Dühring*,²⁶ but also upon the "polemical" nature of his book, and above all on his agreement with and indebtedness to Marx, the scope of which go beyond Marx's rereading of *Anti-Dühring* and his composition of Chapter X. As Engels put it: "The foundations and the development of the concepts elaborated in this book are for the greatest part due to Marx, and to myself only in the slightest measure." With respect to the Preface, one might recall the judgement of Georges Bataille and Raymond Queneau who, in March 1932, saw in it a veritable piece of autocritique in which Engels, by virtue of "an admirable effort," accepted his own failure and abandoned his theses.²⁷ Be that as it may, David Riazonov (1967, 210) was

26 Engels puts it thus: "I would like to have changed the part which deals with the theoretical science of nature. This is marred by a severe awkwardness of exposition"; "generally speaking, I develop with a certain clumsiness in the domain of the theoretical science of nature."

27 Engaging in an analysis which displays, for its time, a rare perspicacity (cf. their remarks on "the negation of the negation" or on mathematics), they note: "Nonetheless he wrote this second preface in which, having recognized the inadequacy of the developments in *Anti-Dühring* concerning the dialectic, he gives a definition of it which amounts to a rejection of his initial position. . . . this retreat alone is enough to account for the fact that he left unfinished a work to which, as he declares, he had devoted the best part of eight years" (*Social Critique, op. cit.*, 210). The definition in question is the following: "Now, it is precisely the representation of diametrical oppositions as irreconcilable and insoluble and the fixing by force of the lines of demarcation and of class differences which have conferred upon the theoretical science of nature in modern times its limited, metaphysical character. The recognition that these oppositions and these differences certainly exist in nature, but only with relative validity; that, in contrast, the absolute fixity and value that they are assigned are only introduced into nature by reflection, this is the essential aspect of the dialectical conception of nature" (*Anti-Dühring*).

to recommend *Anti-Dühring* as “the best introduction to the study of *Capital*.”

In the second place, proper recognition needs to be given to Engels’ own aims, in that, rather than seeking, unless by chance, to lay the foundations for “a philosophy of nature,” his object was to consider recent scientific discoveries and to integrate them within a theoretical vision capable of preserving scientists, who were generally ignorant of the history of philosophy, from “the incoherence and confusion” of metaphysics. Against such a danger, only the dialectic could provide security and was adequate to the processes of evolution, for, once the Kantian thing-in-itself and any idealist premises had been repudiated, “once all that was gone, there still remained the Hegelian dialectic,” to be reestablished, as Lenin saw it, as “the materialist dialectic.” Engels is logical with his own procedures: “It is possible nevertheless that the progress of the theoretical science of nature shall render my work superfluous, whether for the most part or in its totality” (again in the 1885 Preface to *Anti-Dühring*). Who would want to challenge the permanent necessity of such an epistemological endeavor, including revisions and rectifications? Or, for that matter, the necessity of a reflection on the dialectic, divested of substantialism, that is to say, “a dialectic without dogma” (the formula comes from Robert Havemann, cited by Prestipino, 1976, 167), moving in such diverse directions as those, for example, of J. Cavailles (1947), when he insists upon the necessity of the dialectic for the constitution of a theory of science, of Gaston Bachelard (1949, 1953), of the Frankfurt School (AH, 1974; Adorno, 1978; Jay, 1977), or of Althusser (1965) in his two essays “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” and “On the Materialist Dialectic.”

We should also remember the researches by Ludovico Geymonat and his school in the direction of a dialectical materialism resolutely freed from Diamat and in direct relation with the history of the sciences, as Engels had wished. Ultimately it does not seem seriously tenable to charge someone whose first rule was “to install material realities in their historical place” (Engels, 1875), with having driven a cleft between nature and history, or with having deduced the second term from the first. “The science of thought is therefore, like every other science, a historical science, the science of the historical development of human thought.”²⁸ Philosophy, in this light, includ-

ing its viewpoint on the sciences, ceases to be external to history, and therefore to politics and to the struggles that structure it. Lenin saw this clearly, in contrast to his successors who, in their quest for legitimation, restored the old discourse of the universal and its abstract “laws” simply in order to serve their own will for domination. In consequence, any search for an elusive Marxist philosophy will be in vain, unless one contents oneself with the institutional forms that instrumentalize it, by perverting any critical approach whatsoever, be it in the sciences, in the economy, in politics or in culture. History has presented us with this lesson, in the form of Engels’ full implication in it. At the same stroke, it has definitively unleashed that current of critical thought which is, for its part, authentically Marxist.

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28 Former Preface to *Anti-Dühring*, cited above, 49. A number of judgements support this lesson, for example that of Gramsci: “Engels’ formulation according to which ‘the unity of the world consists in its materiality revealed . . . through the long and laborious development of philosophy and the natural sciences’ contains precisely the germ of the right conception, because he has recourse to history and to man in order to reveal objective reality” (*Materialismo storico*, *op. cit.*, 177); or that of Timpanaro when he sees in *Dialectics of Nature* the refutation of ahistorical interpretations of nature (*op. cit.*, 77). Sartre himself is not far from this judgement, in spite of the fact that he substitutes anthropology for logic: “A materialist dialectic only has meaning if it establishes within human history the primacy of material conditions as the praxis of situated men discovers and endures them” (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 129).

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