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Nana Liu

Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Beihang University), nanaliu@188.com

Yumeng Xia

Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Beihang University), yumengxia2022@outlook.com

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Young Engels Is Still Engels: A Response to Terrell Carver

Abstract

Terrel Carver assumes that existing biographies of Engels unfairly seek to explain his ideas in relation to Marx and seek to reconstruct the life journey, especially the ideological journey, of young Engels. He proposes two arguments: first, Engels' ideological growth had no direct purpose or direction and was full of uncertainties; but also, second, that the young Engels' theoretical achievements have been unduly underestimated as they were much more profound than Marx's, such that Marx was the main beneficiary of their initial meeting. One problem with Carver's argument is that his new insights are often not that new at all. His anti-teleological Engels is a liberal, but this is a more-or-less static form of liberalism that seems innocent of any immanent mechanism through which Engels's trajectory toward revolutionary socialism might be understood. "Engels vs. Marx" is a trite trope. The proposition of "Engels vs. Marx" functions to deny the theory and practice of Marxist revolutionaries and politicians after Engels. This is something that the left academia should be vigilant about.

Keywords

Young Engels; Engels vs. Marx; Marxism

Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to thank Professor Raju Das for his encouragement to write this piece and Professor Paul Blackledge and Professor Zhang Xin for their valuable comments and suggestions on the earlier drafts of the manuscript.

Terrell Carver's aim in *Engels before Marx* is to overcome the limitations of traditional biographies of Engels by telling the story of his life prior to the moment of his meeting with Marx, or at least prior to their second meeting, as the first was a "distinctly chilly" affair. Consequently, this is a book that seeks to avoid "the teleology of biography" through which the story of Engels's youth is read as a mere precursor to his subsequent relationship with Marx (p. 2). Whereas Carver believes that existing biographies of Engels unfairly seek to explain his ideas in relation to Marx, he asks a different question: what was Engels like before he teamed up with Marx (p. 2)? In order to achieve his goal of surpassing the teleology of biography, Carver seeks to reconstruct the life journey, especially the ideological journey, of young Engels. He proposes two arguments: first, Engels' ideological growth had no direct purpose or direction and was full of uncertainties; but also, second, that the young Engels' theoretical achievements have been unduly underestimated as they were much more profound than Marx's, such that Marx was the main beneficiary of their initial meeting.

Carver should be credited with his broad coverage of young Engels's poetry, comics, and communication articles. Historical details abound in this fascinating text. Carver introduces the background and content of schoolboy Engels' novels and poems and makes commendable efforts to paint a vivid portrait of him as a talented writer, painter, and music-loving young man. Moreover, Carver locates Engels' thoughts within the social circumstances of his teenage years. He repeatedly reminds readers and researchers that "the past is a foreign country" whose mores can best be understood in its own terms and through the lens of a detailed understanding of the social conditions of the age, including the fragmentation of the German states, the bureaucratic structure of the Prussian system, and the Pietism of his home life. He explains why Engels used anonymity in his early publications, as well as the fact that literary creation in the early 19th century often took the form of satirical and metaphorical poetry.

Carver tries to reconstruct this world through young Engels's eyes. This is a commendable project, but one gets the feeling that he tries too hard to disassociate his reconstructed, anti-teleological Engels from Engels's own recollections of this moment in his life. Indeed, Engels's recollections are the elephant in Carver's room; jostling at the edges of his narrative, demanding a hearing that Carver all too often dismisses. This approach means that Carver's project often reads less as a balanced reconstruction of Engels's youth and more as an attempt to discredit Engels's own reminiscences on the subject. In fact, Carver's claim that he "understand[s] Engels better than Engels" has the smell of his own "teleology" through which he attempts to support his decades-old project of distancing Engels from Marx.

One problem with Carver's argument is that his new insights are often not that new at all. For example, he stresses the fact that in Engels's adolescent letters to his grandfather, he selected some non-religious hero characters and comments that researchers should pay more attention to Engels' connections to the world beyond his own immediate Pietistic family background. However, this is not a discovery, but rather the "old"

common sense that has been detailed by writers whom Carver would probably dismiss as agents of teleological biographies (Zhang Xin, 1998; Liu Nana, 2021).

Whatever problems may exist with the so-called teleological literature, the opposite seems to be the case with Carver's book. His anti-teleological Engels is a liberal, but this is a more-or-less static form of liberalism that seems innocent of any immanent mechanism through which Engels's trajectory toward revolutionary socialism might be understood. Carver cannot answer this question because his generalized concept of "liberalism" acts as a barrier to a full picture of the process of Engels' ideological growth.

As mentioned above, Carver suggests that there is no clear direction to Engels's youthful evolution both as a thinker and in his career. For example, his analysis of the novel "The Pirate Story" written by schoolboy Engels presents some changing trends in Engels' thinking, opposing authoritarian authority and pursuing freedom. He is concerned about literary works with the theme of people power, and his focus on folklore/literary works is on one theme: "overthrows the reactionary rule of the aristocratic elite." (p. 23) Even in Engels's Bremen days, Carver insists he did not have a clear ideological transformation, denying the clear changes in Engels' ideological stance and the signs of a future vocation. "Engels did his best to perform in this way and to these scripts, rather than to succeed at business. Perhaps he was banking on his position as son and heir to see him through, though we get no hint as to where he thought he was actually headed." (p. 30) However, do not the writers and artists that the young Engels engaged with offer strong evidence of the changes that were happening in his mind? While it is true that Engels' thought underwent numerous and rapid changes, these changes do evidence a clear direction, despite Carver's claim that "what that conventional prologue misses, and what is hard to recover now, is the day-to-day conflictual and "edgy" way that that binary was constructed at the time through struggles and upsets, decisions, and compromises." (p. 10) This point is important, but Carver fails to ask obvious further questions: which part of Engels's thought is being fought and subverted and which is the compromise part? These questions allow us a better vantage point to understand the clear and extended direction within the seemingly chaotic and complex ideological viewpoints and propositions of Engels's youth, and this clear direction is presented by Engels himself, who I think is a better guide than Carver on these issues.

In Chapter 4, Carver comprehensively discusses three stunning pamphlets written by Engels during his military service in Berlin to refute Schelling. While Carver admits that Engels had by this point found his vocation, he still emphasizes the "uncertainty", "contingency", and "not necessarily" nature of this untenable choice. But this argument requires omissions, and the key omission here is Carver's failure to mention Engels's first meeting with Marx, when Engels appeared full of admiration only to be dismissed by the slightly older man who wrongly tarred him with the same brush as Bruno and Edgar Bauer's "hot air" brand of Young-Hegelian communism (Blackledge 2019, 22-3). Nonetheless, Engels returned to the editorial offices of *Rheinische Zeitung* in

Cologne on his way back from Berlin in 1842, and if there was no evidence that he intended to visit Marx at this time, he once again returned to the editorial department of *Rheinische Zeitung* at the end of November 1842 on his way to Britain. What negative explanation can be made for this? If his thought changes without directionality and certainty, why would Engels want to visit Marx? One gets the impression that Carver wants to gloss over inconvenient facts such as these to confirm his own conclusions. After arriving in Manchester, Engels wrote the article *Progress of Social Reform on the Continent*. In this article, he comments on various socialist theories have not completely shaken off the influence of Utopian socialism and speculative philosophy, but the core content of this article has shown that he began to turn to a much more practical form of communism than that associated with the Bauers, and this appears to explain why this article is not mentioned in *Engels before Marx*.

Carver claims that in their initial and subsequent collaborations, Marx used Engels. Thus Engels was listed as the lead author on the title page of *The Holy Family*, and rightly so “by reputation and experience. Marx was miles behind: just a couple of dozen genuinely published items, mostly in his own newspaper, and all quite brief, nothing even so long as a pamphlet.” (p. 103) Dwelling for a while on the claim that Marx used Engels we might generate some answers to a set of questions that almost no one ever asks: Why was the twenty-six-year-old Marx so interested in the twenty-three-year-old Engels? Why did Marx stick to the friendship and—rather unusually for him—manage it so well? (p. 3) Carver raises this question to imply that Marx used young Engels' outstanding literary talents and reputation. Regarding the division of their teamwork and the contribution of the collaboration between the two in "The Holy Family" Engels wrote:

“The *Critical Criticism* has *still not arrived!* Its new title, *The Holy Family*, will probably get me into hot water with my pious and already highly incensed parent, though you, of course, could not have known that. I see from the announcement that you have put my name first. Why? I contributed practically nothing to it and anyone can identify your style.”

“The *Critical Criticism* [The Holy Family] — I think I've already told you it had arrived — is quite outstanding. Your expositions of the Jewish question, the history of materialism, and the *Mystères* [de Paris, E. Sue] are splendid and will make an excellent impact. But for all that, the thing's too long. The supreme contempt we two evince towards the [Allgemeine] *Literatur-Zeitung* is in glaring contrast to the twenty-two sheets we devote to it. In addition, most of the criticism of speculation and abstract being, in general, will be incomprehensible to the public at large, nor will it be of general interest. Otherwise, the book is splendidly written and enough to make you split your sides. The Bauers won't be able to say a word. By the way, if Bürgers reviews it in Püttmann's first volume [Rheinische Jahrbücher — the review of *The Holy Family* did not appear in the journal] he might mention the reason — namely my short ten days' stay in Paris — why I covered so little ground, restricting myself to what could be written without delving more deeply into the matter. Anyway, it looks odd, my

having but 1 1/2 sheets in the thing while you have over 20. You'd have done better to have omitted the piece on the 'conditions of prostitution'. It's too slight and altogether unimportant."

(MECW Volume 38, p. 26)

Engels emphasized twice that Marx did not need to put his name first. He praised Marx's excellent work and candidly expressed his views on its shortcomings. Hence there is no such thing as the "deferential and faux-naïf" that Engels showed in his cooperation with Marx as Carver mentioned in this book (p. 109). It is obvious that Engels ingeniously pioneered the study of political economy and influenced Marx to start and deepen in this field (Blackledge 2019, 23). The different writing styles and research methods of Marx and Engels precisely indicate that the two are independent individuals and close partners, and their noble friendship should not be speculated as the submissive one vs. the shameless other.

Engels vs. Marx is a trite trope. There are two tendencies that we believe are not advisable. The first is to "praise Marx and belittle Engels", which means intentionally or unintentionally ignoring and denying Engels' theoretical contributions. It is assumed that the common achievements of Marx and Engels are basically Marx's independent achievements, and the contribution of Engels in them is not worthy to be mentioned or only mentioned in a few words (John O'Neill, 1996). The second is "Engels against Marx", which intentionally seeks different content from Marx's research based on Engels' independent creative research results. It is undeniable that as two independent individuals, there must be differences in their thoughts. However, intentionally elevating this difference to "opposition" clearly goes against Marx AND Engels' intention (Paul Blackledge, 2020).

The proposition of "Engels vs. Marx" functions to deny the theory and practice of Marxist revolutionaries and politicians after Engels. "Furthermore, the leaders of the Second International, as well as those who led the first successful Marxist seizure of state power in the Russian Revolution, were heavily influenced by Engels's views on history, the state, and revolution. What these traditional Marxists thought of as Marxism was actually Marx's theory heavily influenced by the late Engels." (Kohei Saito, 2021) Based on the premise that Lenin was more influenced by Engels than by Marx, negating Engels consequently negates Lenin, and thus negates the achievements of the magnificent proletarian revolution outside of Europe, including the Chinese Revolution. Even though Carver's book may seem to uphold and elevate Engels' achievements, its core is still the "Engels against Marx" myth. It may seem contrary to the research that directly negates Engels' theoretical achievements, but the purpose and intention are "different paths leading to the same goal". This is something that the left academia should be vigilant about.

Again, studying Engels should not intentionally even blindly ignore the records left by Engels himself, especially when he has already made his own clear statements about them. "Marx is rightly regarded as a genius. And the role of 'second fiddle' to Marx is

one that Engels willingly played.” (Royle, 2021) Carver is determined to argue that Engels’s own reminiscences of his youth are unreliable as a means to insist on re-interpreting their initial collaboration as "outstanding young Engels" meets "incompetent young Marx". This claim is not tenable. Referring to a quote from Engels cited by Carver in this book: “It’s remarkable that if you consider our greatest writers, they always seem to go in pairs.” (p. 25) There is no doubt about his noble friendship with Marx, and young Engels is Engels himself.

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Author Biography

Nana Liu is an Associate Professor at Beihang University. Yumeng Xia is a graduate student at Beihang University.