

# Engels and utopia. An Apocryphal Testament : Socialism, Utopian and Scientific

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**No book can be delivered with its instructions and anyway no specific instructions would prevent others from existing. But...**

The following information, I think, is reliable and, therefore, can be given some credence : Engels too was once young before becoming old. It is the young man who, examining *The progress of social reform on the continent*, *The situation in England*, *The progress of communism in Germany* (the titles of his first articles), acknowledges and examines the various forms of socialism and communism without ever dismissing them as Utopias [1]. This same young man who, in most of the articles I have referred to, but also mainly in his *Description of communist colonies appeared lately and still existing* and his *Elberfeld address*, constantly praises communism for its effectiveness and rationality [2]. First for its effectiveness, since regarding the communist colonies, “we can see that all these experiments have been successful and that the community of property is not impossible at all” ; then for its rationality, insofar as Engels contrasts the “rational manner” of “regulating the economic affairs of society”, found in the “works of English socialists and some writins of Fourier”, with an unconscious mode of production, contrary to Reason, left “to the mercy of chance” [3]. In the same way, he contrasts, “the world of the free market” where “a rational organisation is out of the question” with a “sensibly organised society.” [4] The young man writing *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* or *The condition of the working class in England*, is, in many respects, ahead of Marx.

It is with that impatient young man, flirting on the outskirts of Utopia perhaps more than on the outskirts of philosophy, that an essay on the relationships between Engels and Utopia should start. However, since I must deal with “the legatee and theorist of Marxism” [5], I shall recall his youth only for the record, to check and correct the memory of the man become mature, since my contribution will address the meaning and the status of *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, i.e., a pamphlet that, it should be recalled, was to a certain extent pieced together from the chapters of a book, *The Anti-Düring*, that was to serve for a controversy dictated by the circumstances [6].

No book can be delivered with its instructions and anyway no specific instructions would prevent others from existing but Engels’s pamphlet has so often been the object of so many declarations of dutiful loyalty and has received so many testimonies of mournful forbearance, that we tend to be distrustful.

Those, for whom the announcement of science — found at long last — was a substitute for an examination of its foundations, took the short cut : a science so singular that it proposes to establish the foundations of revolutionary communism — no small feat ! Yet they first flattened it out into positivism crossed with dialectics and then folded it into a sort of scientism devoid of dialectics. With this brief depiction, the reader will have recognized the founders of orthodoxy, eager to squander the heritage and to establish their authority.

However, if Engels’s work is to be regarded as the “Introduction to Scientific Socialism”, hailed by Marx in his *Foreword*, it is insofar as the scientific transformation of socialism equals its dialectic transformation : the very strength of Engels’s demonstration lies in this statement

that, as we know, raises as many problems as it solves but which raises them on the appropriate ground. In other words, it is through dialectics that it is possible to get rid of abstract Utopia and open up to concrete Utopia.

Therefore, it is a misinterpretation to deplore either a short-sighted scientism on the one hand, as Sorel does when he fails to distinguish Engels's text from its orthodox fate, or its lack of Utopian warmth. Yet Engels is to be taken at his word when he sends "the scribblers and pen-pushers" back to their drawing-boards, adding, "Let them bring out the so-called superiority of their composed minds in the face of such 'follies'." "We prefer to rejoice in the emergence of brilliant ideas and germs of brilliant ideas that push up everywhere through the fantastic cover and to which those Philistines are blind." [7] If Engels left it to the Philistines to comment upon the founders' extravagance, it may be because he sensed that there would be no shortage of Philistines on the Marxists' side. If he preferred to rejoice at brilliant ideas, it is because he had not forgotten the enthusiasm of the impatient young man who praised, at times with some lack of judgment, all the Utopians' ideas that could contribute to a plan of total emancipation. The aging Engels remembered the young Engels.

In 1877 when Engels saw "a comprehensive breadth of view " in Saint-Simon, perhaps he remembered praising, as early as 1843, his "flashes of inspiration" but without saying exactly which ones. In 1877 the praise was more detailed but Engels was to make two attempts before achieving the final version.

On the contrary, when Engels praised Fourier's genius, he was certainly not reluctant in remembering the enthusiasm of his youth. In 1843, he retained from Fourier "the great axiom of social philosophy" — the satisfaction of the needs of all men through the free practice of every man's inclinations to activity. He called attention to the demonstration according to which "work and enjoyment can identify with each other". He praised the recognition of the need to promote association, although he immediately criticised Fourier's refusal to abolish private property [8]. Later texts abound in explicitly or implicitly admitted annexations, particularly about the alienation of work and its emancipation, the alienation of both men and women, and women's emancipation [9]. *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* reaffirms and expands on all this. However a point has perhaps not been sufficiently stressed so far : in a text focusing on the role of dialectics in the transformation of Utopia, Engels goes as far as to say that Fourier "uses the dialectic method in the same masterly way as his contemporary, Engels [10] ".

Finally, as early as 1843, Engels was full of praise for Owen's plans and achievements, when dealing with his community experiments or with the relating building projects, warmly described in *the Elberfeld Address*. Time never lessened Engels's enthusiasm for Owen. For anyone who remembers that Marx and Engels's critique of Utopias rules out detailed programs and dogmatic dictates, such enthusiasm might even be regarded as out of proportion when reading the following statement, "And in his definite plan for the future, the technical working-out of details is managed with such practical knowledge (...) that the Owen method of social reform once accepted, there is from the practical point of view little to say against the actual arrangement of details [11] ".

In any case, if one confines oneself to the above-mentioned pamphlet, it is obvious that the warm stream of concrete Utopia runs through the examination of the founders of socialism, who remained locked up in abstract Utopia. The considerable power of Engels's text lies in a bet that is largely won : to bring dialectics and Utopia together ; on this account, and with all the hazards of the genre, it is a founding text. But if the enthusiasm for Utopia is not altered by the proclaimed triumph of dialectics, why do the three chapters of *The Anti-Düring* in question still raise a number of questions ? Less probably because of the content they expound than because of the status that is attributed to them.

As the example of young Engels shows, *going through the phase of Utopia, however abstract Utopia may be, is necessary to the development of science*. Is it to be regarded as a biographical anecdote or as a theoretical imperative ? In the second case, is there not a Utopian phase that is necessary to the other way of establishing science addressed in Daniel Bensaïd's recent essay [12] ? Did what was true for Marx cease to be once "Socialism became a science" that had [now] to be elaborated in all its "details and relations", to use Engels's words [13] ? All these questions remain unanswered in Engels's pamphlet. Better yet, since some consider this pamphlet as the ultimate, exhaustive and final truth of Marx's theoretical work — a testamentary declaration as it were — they deliberately refrain from raising these questions.

To be convinced, one has only to dwell on the inconsistencies that can be found between the statements of this pseudo-testament and those in Engels's previous works and even more in Marx's : they disclose a complex itinerary [14].

### ***A complex itinerary***

What part did the founders play in the materialist development of socialism, in the critical development of economics and in the proletarian development of the theory ? The question is threefold : foundation, method and position are to be examined here. Marx and Engels's answers from 1844 to 1848 deserve to be recalled.

It is to its materialist *foundation*, acknowledged by the founders, that socialism owes its theoretical value. The now classic text, *The Holy Family*, shows how socialists and communists, as the heirs of French socialism, contributed to the materialist development of science ratified by the convergence of socialism and humanism. However Marx does not fail to emphasize that, because of the battle it had to wage against Hegelian speculative idealism and contrary to French materialism, German materialism had become "a materialism *now completed by speculation itself*." [15]

In *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx makes the implicit criticism even more explicit in turning it against Feuerbach himself : the limits of initial materialism are those of an *intuitive materialism* that, unlike *practical materialism*, is unable to capture the practical dimension of reality and, as a result, the conditions of its transformation. Unless human activity (and particularly revolutionary activity) is included in the understanding of materialism, one runs the risk of adopting either a contemplative attitude (Feuerbach's case) or a doctrinal position (common to eighteenth century materialists and to Utopians). Nevertheless, according to Marx, the materialist foundation of Utopian socialism represents undeniable progress.

The critique of economics became scientific owing to its *method*. At the outset, the first forms of socialism and communism seem to have played a major role in this process. In *The Holy Family*, Marx attributes to Proudhon the idea (inspired by Hegel) according to which "errors are the steps to science" [16] and stresses that each critical theory of economics is made possible by the previous one, and goes beyond it. In that respect, the allegedly Utopian works of Saint-Simon and Fourier should be regarded as historical phases of scientific development, of a scientific development of the critique of economics, "Therefore Proudhon's work is scientifically superseded by the critique of economics, including economics as it appears in Proudhon's concept." "But such a process has only been made possible thanks to Proudhon himself, in the same way as Proudhon's critique implies the critique of the mercantile system (mercantilism) by the Physiocrats, that of the Physiocrats by Adam Smith, that of Adam Smith — alongside with Fourier and Saint-Simon — by Ricardo." [17]

Yet in *Misère de la Philosophie*, the limits — so far lessened in the perspective of the merits — come to the fore : the first critiques of economics confine themselves to Utopia when they oppose a totality, whose logical sequence they cannot apprehend, to contradictions, whose origin they cannot understand. The break with Proudhon is established ; Ricardian socialists,

who rebel against Ricardo's conception on his very ground, are given a better treatment, though they indulge in a Utopian interpretation of economics that precisely misses the point of view of totality that is the strength of Ricardo's conception. The fact remains that, according to Marx, Utopians have paved the way for the critique.

Finally it is thanks to their *position* — more specifically to their class position — that Utopians are in keeping with the proletarian development of the theory. The writings of 1844-45 issue repeated praise in this respect : praise for Weitling and "the theoretical superiority of the German proletariat", praise for Proudhon and his "first scientific manifesto of the proletariat", praise for the "intellectual creations" of the French and English workers [