

A passage from Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845, from Chapter 3, 'The Great Towns';  
Discuss in the light of selected aspects of two of the theoretical approaches introduced to you this term.

How Marxist was Engels? Approaching his writing about the slums of London from a critical Marxist approach, certainly opens our eyes to this question. I have endeavoured to avoid Leninist Marxism, selecting instead the theoretical aspects of Engelsian and Althusserian Marxism. My second approach to the text is to deconstruct it along post-structuralist principles, selecting (over Barthes' free play) Barbara Johnson's premise that "the deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text".

Engels' background is that of a "cultured and highly educated" German who "had that reverence for "great" art and literature which was typical of [his] class"<sup>1</sup>. What then is he doing having "tramped" the pavements of London "for some days" until he has "tired himself out". Engels has the leisure to walk the streets precisely because from 1842 he is helping at the textile firm owned by his father<sup>2</sup>. Because he is not a member of the working class, he can afford the time to leisurely fall into the despondent reflection suggested by the tone of this passage. The enforced pathos of this text, "It is only then that the traveller realises the human suffering which has made all this possible", this fashionable disaffection which Engels shows for a society in which his father is so thoroughly enfranchised, betrays Engels' guilt about his own class status. The working class do not need to seek out depression - they do not have the guilt of reclining in comfort whilst knowing that others suffer under them.

Engels speaks for the workers, he gives us a tour of their housing conditions, a practical form of class tourism in that eyes can be opened to the misery of poverty, yet Engels is still as much a tourist as those readers he addresses. Repeatedly in this passage, Engels unintentionally reveals his class status; there is little he can do to hide it. Engels' understanding of human nature is applied in a naïve way characteristic of, but not peculiar to, a middle class outlook. Engels sees men and women "drawn from all classes and ranks of society" and asks the reader "Are they not all human beings with the same innate characteristics and potentialities?"; he goes on "And do they not all aim at happiness by following similar methods?". This is an outlook born out of suburbia, out of egalitarian monotony, essentially this is a communist ideal which sits uneasily with meritocracy, with an idea of the individual as distinct from their surroundings, with inherited genetic nature, or with prejudices or observations about what the so-called "posh" are "like". Engels places such great significance upon civility that for him, it eclipses practicality. "No one even thinks of sparing a glance for his neighbour in the streets", Engels writes. Would he have it that each stranger acknowledged each other in this vast sea of strange faces, hailed "good day", or even shook hands? The behaviour of people on a crowded street could only be "distasteful" to a person whose class status encourages him to elevate manners beyond practicality.

Engels' class status becomes more apparent still under the close formal analysis propounded by the Formalist school<sup>3</sup>. That Engels feels degraded by being a part of the masses, is suggested by his description of his progress as that of a man who has "tramped the pavements", who has "tired himself out by jostling his way through the crowds". The opinion that "the restless and noisy activity of the crowded streets is highly distasteful, and it is surely

abhorrent to human nature itself" is juxtaposed with the next sentence, "hundreds and thousands of men and women drawn from all classes and ranks of society pack the streets of London". Why should this be so distasteful to a man such as Engels? Is this not a vision of egalitarianism?

It is illuminating to examine the assumptions which Engels makes regarding his readership. He addresses (in German) a readership that would be at least mildly startled by the exhortation that "no one even thinks of sparing a glance for this neighbour in the streets", a readership which values what is proper and decorous, which appreciates and would cultivate what is "best in human nature", which worries about "the disintegration of society" and considers the development of "creative faculties" to be important. Engels addresses an audience which is far from egalitarian in its assumptions, readers who appreciate how tiresome it would be to tramp "abhorrent" "crowded streets". The brief flash of humour in this extract further illuminates the contemporary people reading this text. "They are tacitly agreed on one thing only - that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement so as not to collide with the stream of people moving in the opposite direction". This is the humour of the cultured; the condescending wit of those who know better.

Engels has been interpellated by capitalist society to the extent that he must marvel at these "wonders of civilisation" and becomes captivated for days by the "magnificence" of the titular "great towns". This is a form of "recruitment" which Althusser describes as the way that ideology ""transforms" the individuals into subjects"<sup>4</sup>. In this instance, what Marx calls

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3 <sup>3</sup>Victor Shklovsky; *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*; Lee T. Lemon, Marion J. Reis; (USA; University of Nebraska Press; 1965).

4 <sup>4</sup>Louis Althusser; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p301.

"the fetishism of commodities"<sup>5</sup> has involved the concealment of the suffering endemic to this city, by the ideological imposition of ingrained social notions about the value of the achievements of civilisation. It is only by tearing away from what he has been indoctrinated to accept as obvious that Engels can begin to see what he believes is the truth. Althusser describes this insipid quality of ideology: "It is a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so since these are "obviousnesses") obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognise*"<sup>6</sup>.

Engels has swallowed the ideology of "human nature". This confines him by forming in his mind, the civic mental categories of good and bad behaviour. Implicitly, good behaviour has become associated in Engels' mind with the idea of "developing to the full the qualities with which nature has endowed them". It is associated with a belief in civil behaviour - that behaviour which will make one a good citizen - and established an imaginary conflict between "society" (with its idiom of "fellow citizen" and "neighbours") and "individuals". Individuals who are "guided by ... private principles" must therefore be in contradiction to a set of overarching moral imperatives. To "concentrate upon [one's] private affairs" has become polarised as selfish, and not merely selfish, but "narrow-minded egotism". Thus the socially privileged ideology of "human nature" invokes its opposition; animal nature is condemned in even its mildest form as "repulsive and disgraceful". This selfishness is now "brutal indifference" (etymologically derived from the Latin *brutus*, thus brute: beastlike<sup>7</sup>) which must herald the disintegration of what Engels calls "society". This is a fundamental ideology. "Society" itself is a social construct, an abstract idea which encourages its subjects

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5 <sup>5</sup>Karl Marx; 'Capital'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p270.

6 <sup>6</sup>Louis Althusser; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p300.

to selflessness. In Engels' text, the ideology of "society" has effectively assimilated "human nature", "morality" and "the individual"<sup>8</sup>.

In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser writes "ideology is a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"<sup>9</sup>. The phrase "imaginary relationship" is used to explain that the relation to their conditions of existence is something which men ""represent to themselves""<sup>10</sup>. However we can take this phrase further to suggest that the ""representation"" is not merely constructed in the imagination and overlaid upon reality, but that the relationship itself is imaginary - it consists only of this representation. The disturbing extension of Althusser's premise is that we have no relation to our "real conditions of existence" at all - we merely represent reality to ourselves in the language of the state.

Engels tries to break free of this interpellation. He sees behind the "magnificence" of the outward show of things. To quote Hazlitt in reference to *Gulliver's Travels*, "his object was to strip empty pride and grandeur of the imposing air which external circumstances throw around them; and for this purpose, he cheated the imagination of the illusions which the prejudices of sense and of the world put upon it"<sup>11</sup>. But in attempting to do this, Engels replaces one ideology with another. This text functions as an ideological state apparatus for the Marxist cause. It works by the technique of "defamiliarisation"<sup>12</sup> described by Victor Shklovsky, to represent what was once "magnificent" as oppressive. It uses the emotive

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7 <sup>7</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*; seventh edition; Sykes, J. B.; (UK; Oxford University Press; 1986); p117.

8 <sup>8</sup> The speech marks here denote ideologies.

9 <sup>9</sup> Louis Althusser; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p294.

10 <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; p295.

11 <sup>11</sup> From a lecture given by Hazlitt in 1818, but quoted here from: Swift, Jonathan; *Gulliver's Travels*; (Great Britain; Penguin Classics; 1985); p16.

12 <sup>12</sup> Peter Barry; *Beginning Theory*; first edition; (UK; Manchester University Press; 1995); p161.

language of literature (such as "tramped the pavements", "brutal indifference" and "frantic bustle") to make a familiar London seem new to us. Above all, it does not reveal our "conditions of existence"<sup>13</sup>, but instead merely changes our "relation"<sup>14</sup> to those conditions. We might observe that this is a dialectical progression<sup>15</sup>, but I would suggest that even a new whole which contains both oppositions cannot show us reality, only another ideological representation of it. It is this pattern which suggests that we can have no relation to reality other than the ideology we use to interpret it.

The author is dead, long live the text!<sup>16</sup> So cry the triumphant post-structuralists as they play freely in a decentred world lacking any authorial legitimator, any touchstone of meaning, a submerged waterworld of fluidity and relativity. This is the post-structuralists' linguistic expanse, all words exerting forces on each other, inherently containing their opposites and exhibiting, under the surface, tension between text and meaning. Beneath the overt "transcendental signified"<sup>17</sup> we search for the covert incidental signified. Before they were selected for this passage, before they were edited, even before they were altered by the creative mechanism of translation, Engels' ideas were not his own. Barthes writes, "Did [the author] wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely"<sup>18</sup>. On the premise that to some extent all thought is grounded

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13 <sup>13</sup>Louis Althusser; 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p295.

14 <sup>14</sup>Ibid.

15 <sup>15</sup>A term understood from an explanation of Hegel's "dialectic": Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan; 'Starting With Zero: Basic Marxism'; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p234.

16 <sup>16</sup>Although Barthes heralds "the birth of the reader" (Roland Barthes; 'The Death of the Author'; (1968)), Derrida's exhortation that "there is nothing outside of the text" points us back to the text as a hermetic linguistic whole; since "reading ... cannot legitimately transgress the text towards something other than it" in the "absence of the referent or the transcendental signified" (Jacques Derrida; 'The exorbitant. question of method'; *Of Grammatology*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; (Johns Hopkins University Press; 1976); p158).

17 <sup>17</sup>Jacques Derrida; 'The exorbitant. question of method'; *Of Grammatology*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; (Johns Hopkins University Press; 1976); p158.

18 <sup>18</sup>Roland Barthes; 'The Death of the Author'; (1968).

in language, even Engels' original mental expressions thus relied, to their dissolution, upon this fluid network of shifting meanings.

There is a break between two conflicting meanings within this work and both pertain to notions of the definition of happiness. Firstly, there is the awe which Engels has been inspired with by the "great city", a metropolis which he thinks "teems" with "wonders of civilisation". Engels cannot hide the excitement with which this fills him, he uses words like "teems", "jostling" and "bustle". Here is a tremendous confluence of human life and the socially constructed witness unthinkingly slips into using positive terms to describe what he is trying to condemn. It is the linguistic framework which, however hard one tries to appropriate it, slips free inflicting its oppositional dialectics, its covert meanings upon us. Thus Engels tries to talk of the elitist oligarchy which oppresses and exploits those beneath it. Yet his description of them falls to reference of a "small, closely-knit group of their fellow citizens", thereby serving only to embody and elevate the values of a protective community in the language of the civic-minded. The condemnation becomes a commendation. When Engels writes "nowhere is this selfish egotism so blatantly evident as in the frantic bustle of the great city", the text betrays him. Language has now shifted so that we are inclined to associate "the great and good"; and a "bustle" to the gregarious, social animal of humanity, must seem convivial.

Secondly, on the other side of this opposition, we see Engels struggling to realise "the human suffering which has made all this possible". Thus he talks about "the isolation of the individual", of having "tired himself out by jostling his way through the crowds and dodging the endless stream of coaches and carts which fills the streets". Demonstrating the common interests shared by these people, whilst also searching for some sympathy with them, Engels imploringly asks "Are they not all equally interested in the pursuit of happiness?". In the sign

"happiness", we sense its lurking opposition - the implication is that these people are unhappy. Yet if "isolation" is synonymous with being unhappy, as in the "suffering" crowds who do not think of "sparing a glance for [their] neighbour in the streets", then how can this opposition be reconciled with the linguistic inculcation of a teeming "great city" which bustles with "fellow citizens". It cannot.

There are two notable absences inherent in the rift between happiness and unhappiness in this text. Those are the repressed ideas, subconscious to the text, of love and fellowship. Engels seems to be yearning for recognition as he walks the streets of this vast strange city, surrounded by crowds, yet unacknowledged by anyone; "No one even thinks of sparing a glance for his neighbour in the streets" he decries. Engels seems oblivious to the networks of friendship, love and family linking the individuals he sees before him. This web is invisible to the outsider, and we are forced to ask if the isolation Engels' recounts, is primarily his own. Does Engels project his own loneliness and unhappiness onto the people he sees, and unable to blame them, must he therefore reject the system which makes "so many of their potential creative faculties lie dormant, stunted and unused"? Engels tries to bridge this fault-line of contradictory attitudes by expostulating that "The restless and noisy activity of the crowded streets is highly distasteful and it is surely abhorrent to human nature itself". It is by this unproven surmise that the text hopes to break from revelling in to revolting in "the frantic bustle of the great city". This rift displaces the meaning of happiness into two warring definitions, an oppositional Red Sea. On the one hand, happiness is the act of contributing to and bustling within this edifice of civilisation, on the other, it is the acknowledgement of the individual development of "potential creative faculties".

This raises the equally prominent contradiction within the text between society and individual. Engels writes "the disintegration of society into individuals, each guided by his



private principles and each pursuing his private aims, has been pushed to its furthest limits in London". This disintegration is occurring, Engels infers, because "the fundamental principle of modern society " is "this isolation of the individual - this narrow-minded egotism". Yet Engels also talks about our individuality. He implies that citizens should be able "to develop to the full *those* qualities with which nature has endowed *them*" (my italics), presumably lest they remain, like these faceless masses, a lumpenproletariat whose "creative faculties lie dormant, stunted and unused". When Engels seems appalled that "no one even thinks of sparing a glance for their neighbour in the street", he seems to be calling for a recognition of each person as an individual. Thus individualism becomes a slippery sign, both constructive and destructive to society, both the privileged and its opposition. Is "the pursuit of happiness" a race run by the individual, or race run collectively by society? Engels suggests that since we are all "equally interested " in "the pursuit of happiness", it is better not to "selfishly concentrate upon [one's] private affairs". However, since "happiness" in this context - "the pursuit of happiness" - has come to embody the emphatic individualism of the unashamedly capitalist American state, language has again spilled from Engels' control and now primarily serves to exemplify the individual.

The Engelsian Marxist critic looks at Engels' text and sees the hypocrisy of his class ideologies. The Althusserian critic observes Engels' futile struggle to break out of his interpellation and glimpse his real conditions of existence, only to grasp at another ideology in doing so. The post-structuralist looks to a text authored by language and sees its meaning fissured by the internal contradictions of oppositional terms, between society and individual, between happiness and suffering. The Marxist critic has observed on an ideological class level, the conflicts which the post-structuralist sees as linguistic and philosophical; yet both

disciplines pessimistically see the text as a glass half empty, rather than half full, of the author's meaning.

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