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An untimely geographer: Friedrich Engels, ideas and geography in Oxford

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Abstract

Friedrich Engels is something of a minor figure in geography. In this commentary, we trace Engels' association with Oxford Geography as a point of departure for examining the major and minor registers of an Engellian geography.

Keywords

Engels, Ideas in Geography, indifference, minor, Oxford

Un geógrafo intempestivo: Friedrich Engels, ideas y geografía en Oxford

Resumen

Friedrich Engels es una figura menor en geografía. En este comentario, rastreamos la asociación de Engels con Oxford Geography como un punto de partida para examinar los registros mayores y menores de una geografía engelliana.

Palabras clave

Engels, Ideas en Geografía, indiferencia, menor, Oxford

Introduction

Friedrich Engels is something of a minor figure in geography. There are, of course, various ways to gauge how important, or at least mainstream, a thinker is within a discipline. It is clear, though, that there are very few citations of his work within the confines of academic geography, and he has never been the focus of much sustained engagement by geographers, despite possessing the credentials of a proto-urban and social geographer. If he is known, it is because of his association with Marx – principally through *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 2010a) and *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 2010b) – and occasionally because of his role in codifying Marx's latter work. But for a generation of undergraduate geographers at the University of Oxford, he featured as a key thinker in his own right – or at least one that needed to be read and engaged with as part of a now defunct exam paper on 'Ideas in Geography', which ran from 1983 to 2005.¹ Of all the places that such a radical thinker might be considered set reading, Oxford is not – perhaps – the most likely.² And yet, from the early 1980s until the mid-2000s, Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was an ever-present book, in what was a

relatively short list of set-texts. To be sure, the School of Geography at the University of Oxford was not unique among geography departments in harnessing Engels' untimely work in its degree programme.³ What was distinctive, however, about Oxford Geography's specific appropriation and teaching of Engels, was its disambiguation of Engels' oeuvre from that of Karl Marx and the broader intellectual fields of so-called 'critical' and 'radical' geography. This paper's singular focus on Oxford Geography, therefore, is a partial attempt to animate Engels' geography on its own terms. In this piece, we first trace a brief history of how Engels came to feature on an undergraduate Geography course, mindful of extant discussions on canonicity, the history of ideas, and the role of pedagogy. Then, and second, we develop an account of Engels as a minor geographer, not in order to disparage or underplay his import but instead to

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explore how key insights and contributions continue to surface within the discipline. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the teaching of the history and philosophy of geography and the role of the ‘thinker’ in such accounts.

Ideas in geography

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, change was afoot in the then School of Geography at the University of Oxford.⁴ Without wishing to present a history of the department (although see Pawson, 2009; Scargill, 1999), we do want to reflect on why such changes were taking place. The quantitative revolution had bypassed Oxford and the department had something of a poor reputation (Pallot, 2020), personal communication, 27 August), not least for its association with long-standing research on regional geography, epitomised by the work of AJ Herbertson. A number of new arrivals – among them geomorphologist Barbara Kennedy (St Hugh’s College), historical geographer Jack Langton (St John’s College), urban and Latin American geographer Colin Clarke (Jesus College), and geographer of the Soviet Union, Judith Pallot (Christ Church College) – found allies in historical geographer Michael Williams (Oriental College and St Anne’s College) and geomorphologist Andrew Goudie (Hertford College, later St Cross College), who were all interested in the history of ideas. All of this came well before the arrival of David Harvey in the late 1980s.⁵ They were keen that undergraduates do something different from what they had done at school, and concerned that students were preoccupied with secondary sources (the textbooks remain unnamed) on ideas in geography. The aim, then, was for students to read ‘significant’ books in the original, rather than at second hand.⁶ In a faint echo of Halford Mackinder’s desire that geography be a commingling of history and the natural sciences, there was a growing ambition in Oxford Geography to build intellectual heft into the degree programme by emulating the use of ‘gobbets’ in the teaching of History at the University, hence the turn to the primary writings of non-geographers.⁷ Crucially, these were the writings of some ostensibly great thinkers (the key criteria were disarmingly stark: the thinkers should be dead, and the text available in paperback) who, while not geographers as such, had a lot to say about matters germane to the discipline.⁸

As Powell (2012: 340) noted, when discussing the question of a geographical canon, particular ‘figures, texts and practices have been associated with particular sites – even specific Departments of Geography’. This means, as Keighren et al. (2012: 343) argued, that because the ‘preferences and prejudices of individual academics can shape what, for generations of students, counts as and becomes geography’, it is vital that the processes of canonisation be understood at the level of the institution (see also Powell, 2015). There are varying anecdotal accounts of how the texts were chosen and much of what remains, in terms of archival

material, is in the form of exam papers.⁹ However, it is clear that Darwin’s (1982) *On the Origin of Species* and Malthus’ (1982) *An Essay on Population* were on the list from the off. Engels’ book may well have been a compromise: it was not as dense as some of Marx’s work – yet more substantial than their co-authored manifesto – and was a good fit with the School’s then focus on urban, social and historical geography. Equally, there were links to be drawn between the various texts, not least around questions of population growth, natural selection and class struggle (and revolution). In this respect, *Conditions* was a useful counterweight to Malthus.¹⁰

We are, in short, less concerned with a search for origins than with ‘finding traces, tracking lineages and unpicking filigrees’ (Elden, 2014: 323) and dwelling on why Engels has received only limited attention in the discipline. In this, we are in good company. Of the few geographers who have taken up Engels, there is a tendency to remark upon Engels’ untimeliness. Bunge (1977: 93), for instance, recounts how reading Engels was both reassuring and unnerving. He explains that, while describing the expressways in inner-city Detroit, he was surprised to find that Engels had written in a very similar fashion of tree-lined boulevards in Paris (both facades behind which the slums were hidden from view), some hundred years earlier. And despite not quoting from *Conditions*, Harvey notes how depressing it is that Engels’ (2010a) descriptions in *The Housing Question*, first published in 1872, could just as easily be of ‘contemporary urban processes in much of Asia ... as well as to the contemporary gentrification of, say, Harlem and Brooklyn in New York’ (Harvey, 2012: 17–18). Smith (2016: 679) simply expresses astonishment at how much of Engels’ work is ‘contemporarily relevant’.¹¹

An Engellian geography?

By way of an attempt at animating the nascent geographical credentials of both Engels and his work, we turn back to an examination question grafted from the ‘Ideas in Geography’ paper in 2000. Whilst the question itself makes clear the patent spatial tendencies of Engels’ work, we want to re-visit, and indeed, re-respond (an indulgence we hope former examiners will permit) to the query in such a way that affords greater attendance to the minor interstices of Engels’ geography. The question is as follows:

“What relationship does Engels see between the urbanisation of capital and the geography of the labour market? Illustrate your answers with reference to *The Condition of the Working Class*.”¹²

Let us begin with a prominent quote from the third chapter:

What is true of London, is true of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, is true of all great towns. Everywhere *barbarous indifference*, hard egotism on the one hand, and nameless

misery on the other, everywhere social warfare, every man's [sic] house in a state of siege, everywhere reciprocal plundering under the protection of the law, and all so shameless, so openly avowed that one shrinks before the consequences of our social state as they manifest themselves here undisguised, and can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together. (Engels, 1987: 69; emphasis added)

Engels' naked disdain for what he describes, veering on sarcasm, as 'The Great Towns', captures his cartographic portrayal of the relations between capital and urbanisation. It is a cartography – a geography – of vicious indifference, one underscored by what Engels would famously identify as the moral debasement and apathetic vacuity of the English bourgeoisie. To that end, and in direct response to the question, the relationship Engels sees between the urbanisation of capital and the geography of the labour market is all too obvious, one sedimented in the dialectics of capital and labour, and indeed, by the imbrication of space. As Harvey (2008: 24) avers, '[u]rbanization has always been... a class phenomena of some sort'. It is curious, then, that the conspicuous geography at the heart of Engels' observational and theoretical work has been underplayed.¹³ This might, in part, be due to Engels' variable treatment in historiographical entanglements with Marx whereby the former is either rendered as one-and-the-same figure as his collaborator, or, conversely, castigated as the fraudulent perversion of Marxist thought (Leopold, 2019). In either event, it appears evident that the spatial peculiarities and intensities of Engels' work have long been smoothed out in a canonical merger with Marx (Carver, 2017).

Notwithstanding this intellectual occlusion (see Royle, 2020), inadvertent or otherwise, it remains possible to elucidate Engels' geography in a number of ways, arrayed across what might be termed 'major' and 'minor' registers. In the major register, Engels' geographical impetus and method is clear to the point of vulgarity. His use of cartography, for example, and his proficiency as a cartographic draughtsman (Melis, 1989) is one such obvious marker of a mind that took seriously the question of space. On that point, Engels also develops the conceptual case for an infinite understanding of space (and time) in *Anti-Dühring* (Engels, 2010b).¹⁴ His aforementioned attentiveness to industrial, machinic and class metabolisms would not be out of place in a contemporary textbook in urban geography. He even nods to physical geography in the posthumously published *The Dialectics of Nature* (Engels, 2010c). Moreover, what Rockmore (2000) describes as Engels' 'anti-idealism' manifests itself epistemologically in the guise of a pointillist and positivist approach to observation – the kinds of empirical commitments that have populated and continue to motor some quarters of academic geographical enquiry. An Engellian geography, however, goes beyond the recognisable stakes of a modern spatial science, exceeding the obvious representational resonances with economic and social geography (Mavroudeas, 2020).

To this end, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* might be regarded as Engels' 'minor' text. At first blush, such a claim will doubtless read as counterintuitive, nonsensical even, given Engels' broad stroke portraiture of Salford and Manchester which, to his detractors, has been described uncharitably as 'cartoon' (see Katznelson, 1992). Yet, the notion of the 'minor' used in this instance is not one that ascribes categorical insignificance or diminution to a particular matter of concern (or outright opposition to the major register), but draws attention, instead, to the relational qualities of an idea (e.g. Jellis and Gerlach, 2017; Katz, 1996, 2017). On this point, Katz (1996: 490–491) stresses,

[t]he relationality of 'minor' vis-a-vis 'major' does not mean anything goes. Constituting the minor is not about naming but about consciously working in a vocabulary in which one is not at home – where one has become 'deterritorialized' – but where one works that deterritorialization to its limits, forcing it to express something different.

Engels in *Conditions*, to this end, offers to us something of the minor – of the interstitial – in his assaying of the great towns of England. On the one hand, it is a text mired in the major register of structural narrative, a gauche attempt to stoke revolutionary fervour, written in the arch and unsubtle hubris of a 24-year-old abroad. Yet immanent in this conspicuously major tale is a minor storying of subjectivation in amongst the cramped and claustrophobic 'knotted chaos of houses, more or less on the verge of uninhabitableness' (Engels, 1987: 90). *Conditions* is not a text beholden to the major philosophical tracts on human nature and German idealism that characterised Engels' notable collaborations with Marx; the kinds of abstraction that some geographers such as Doreen Massey found essentialist in their unrefined narratives of class politics and sexual division of labour (see Massey et al., 2009). Moreover, Engels was not, contrary to some accounts, attempting to diagram a crude deterministic relationship between the morphology of the city and the behaviour of its populace. This is not to say, for example, that the stultifying and oppressive conditions of the factory did not have profound somatic or psychological consequences on workers. Circumstances were more dire than Engels could ever convey in words. Instead, Engels, in *Conditions*, is attempting to theorise the city – to draw in the urban – such that it illustrates the generation of proletarian subjectivities and working class subjectivation.¹⁵ If the 'minor' is understood as a mode of action (as opposed to one of reflection), then we can observe, as Balibar (2017) does in the work of Marx, that Engels cannily combines ideas of 'representation' with those of 'subjectivity'. In so doing, and extending Balibar's somewhat counterintuitive argument of Marx to his partner, we might argue that in *Conditions*, Engels is establishing 'the permanent possibility of representing the proletariat to itself as a "subject" in the idealist

sense of the term...’ (Balibar, 2017: 26; emphasis in the original).

A barbarous indifference

This commentary could be read as a nostalgic glance back to Oxford, to a paper (and indeed a course) which is no longer, and to a time when reading books was considered important.¹⁶ It could also be read as another of our attempts to unearth and celebrate the less acclaimed solo work of a thinker better known for their collaborative endeavours (see Jellis et al., 2019). Yet what we have sought to do is foreground how Engels, despite being peripheral to much geographic thought, has nevertheless featured as a thinker worth engaging with – albeit within one particular institution – and who continues to surprise. And while we have not had the chance here to detail his ethnographic approach (see Krishnamurthy, 2000), we have seen how Engels was in many ways *untimely*. Praised for his prescience by the likes of Bunge and Harvey, it is clear that Engels’ work still speaks to our times in unexpected ways. Indeed, Harvey (2014: 292) laments: ‘how shockingly easy it is to take the living conditions of the working classes, the marginalised and the unemployed in Lisbon, São Paulo and Jakarta and put them next to Engels’ classic 1844 description of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and find little substantive difference’. We might, here, also note Engels’ unnervingly apt epidemiological tracing of the urban’s intimate relationship with all manner of disease. Moreover, take Engels’ description of precarity – the threat of being hurled into ‘the fierce whirlpool ... in which it is hard and often impossible to keep [our heads] above water’ (Engels, 1987: 70) – or of English politics – which ‘exist only as a matter of interest’ (Engels, 1987: 233) – and it is clear that these are as apposite now as they ever were. In a moment – a conjuncture – predisposed to what Connolly (2017: 123) describes as ‘neofascist potential’, the concomitant risk of a proliferation of ‘barbarous indifference’ is rife. None more so than in the milieu of ideas, concepts and theorising, and an associated turn to anti-intellectualism (Butler, 2020). Engels would be unlikely to mourn the demise of an ideological intellectualism entrained to vulgar bourgeois concerns. However, he might, in fact, be concerned by a turn away from the revolutionary verve that can be found throughout his texts. And, by extension, we wonder if the demise of the ‘Ideas’ paper at Oxford Geography is symptomatic of a more widespread, and indeed dangerous, decline in the desire and impetus to read, and be moved by, thought. This, then, is perhaps less about the need to read Engels as such (although, clearly, there is much to be found here), but about the importance of thinking-with geographers and non-geographers alike, in such a way that ideas are not dismissed or, worse, met with barbarous indifference.

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Notes

1. Despite the format, this kind of paper is not in and of itself unusual. It is ‘almost obligatory ... for geography degree courses to include some elements of teaching about the philosophical ... contexts of the discipline and their relationships with such matters in allied disciplines’ (Richards et al., 2002: 34).
2. Indeed, Engels (1987: 2727) (emphasis added), writing in one of several prefaces to *Conditions*, is at pains to stress his distance from certain rarefied activities and frivolities, ones which might, fairly or unfairly, be associated with Oxford college life: ‘I forsook the company and the dinner-parties, the port-wine and champagne of the middle-classes’. Engels would have likely bristled at the class privilege and asymmetries engendered by the institutional vagaries of the University of Oxford. ‘Oxford’, and the portmanteau ‘Oxbridge’, hewn from its contrived rivalry with the University of Cambridge, continue to be employed as shorthand terms for describing elitist, exclusive, and exclusionary modes of higher education in the United Kingdom.
3. Mills and Withers (1992), for example, make mention of the use of Engels in teaching qualitative geography at the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, now the University of Gloucestershire. Likewise, Ogborn (1992) outlines how Engels was on the set reading for a course on historical geography at the University of Salford.
4. The University of Oxford is a federal institution, comprising 39 colleges, six permanent-private halls (akin to colleges but founded and maintained by Christian communities) and numerous disciplinary Schools and Departments. The establishment of many colleges predates the existence of the federal university (or at least in its modern incarnation), and to that end they retain semi-autonomy in governance, fellowship and teaching provision. Currently, 14 colleges offer teaching in geography to undergraduate students. Teaching of the Honours degree is shared between the colleges and the School of Geography and the Environment. Colleges provide ‘tutorials’ (small group teaching), whereas the School provides lectures for Geography students across the University. The degree is in two parts. The first year (once termed Honour Moderations,

- now Preliminary Examinations) is designed to introduce students to new concepts, ideas and approaches in geography and to allow the deeper exploration of topics with which they are already familiar. The Final Honour School gives second- and third-year students the opportunity to specialise and tailor their degree to suit their own interests.
5. David Harvey held the Halford Mackinder Professorship in Geography between 1987 and 1995. We might suggest that in much the same manner that Engels was a communist before Marx, so too was Oxford Geography a nascent space of Marxist Geography before the arrival of Harvey. As an aside, Harvey had a mixed impression of his time in Oxford, complaining that people kept treating him as if he'd just arrived from Cambridge, which he had left in 1960, as if 'the intervening twenty-seven years had just been some waiting-room in the colonies', which drove him 'nuts' (Harvey, 2000: 88).
 6. There were no lectures for the paper. Instead, students read the books, and this was accompanied by some college-based teaching in small groups.
 7. A 'gobbet' is a passage or extract of a text curated for study and examination by students. Prevalent in the undergraduate study of History at the University of Oxford, it is also employed as a pedagogical device in other degree programmes, inter alia, Archaeology and Literae Humaniores (Classics).
 8. As the handbook notes, students were 'invited to read six highly influential texts which though written by non-geographers have nevertheless had considerable relevance within geographical thought'.
 9. Namely the examination question papers for Honour Moderations in geography, 1972–2004 (GE 39/1-8).
 10. For an animation of Engels' hostility towards Malthus, see Mayhew (2014).
 11. The special issue that this article features in (see Larsen et al., 2016) is one of the few instances of recent, and sustained, engagement with Engels in Geography. It does not, however, attend to *Conditions* but to *The Housing Question*.
 12. Question 5 from the 'Ideas in Geography' paper in 2000.
 13. Indeed, subject notes composed by Oxford's School of Geography and the Environment, prepared for the 'Ideas in Geography' paper remark: 'almost any book on planning will acknowledge the early contributions to studies of urban spatial structure made by Engels in *Conditions*. But, surprisingly, there has apparently been no thorough study of his contribution to urban geography. Where geographers have looked to Engels, they seem to have found greater inspiration from his much later work *The Dialectics of Nature*, which was only published posthumously'. The notes go on to state, 'Only Soviet geographers seem to have really acknowledged Engels' contribution'. We are grateful to Patricia Daley for recovering and sharing these notes.
 14. On this point, Coones (1983: 100) notes, 'Engels in 'Anti-Dühring' hailed Heraclitus as the first thinker to formulate clearly the concept of a complex, interrelated, and ever-changing world, that is, of nature in a constant state of flux'.
 15. A mode of theorising described as 'embryonic' by Tony Lemon (2020, personal communication, 1 December).
 16. The 'Ideas in Geography' paper came to an end in 2005, when the first-year course was reconfigured from Honour Moderations ('Mods') to Preliminary Examinations ('Prelims'). It was replaced by 'Critical Thinking in Geography' (2006–2010); this was, in turn, superseded by 'Geographical Controversies' (2011–) both of which were developed by Ali Rogers.

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