MARX & ENGELS

The Intellectual Relationship

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4 The Invention of Dialectics

The revolutionary events of 1848–49 altered the lives and circumstances of Marx and Engels, but changed their work surprisingly little. Once the hectic months of journalism were over, and the two had made their separate ways to England and exile, Marx continued his critique of political economy, tormented by poverty and the need to take paid work in journalism. His own autobiography treats 1848–49 almost as an interruption to his studies. Engels wrote The Peasant War in Germany during 1850 for Marx’s new journal, which was short-lived as usual, and then went to work for the family firm in Manchester. He supported the Marx menage and wrote little but occasional journalism (some of it—Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany—published under Marx’s name) during the 1850s and 1860s.

One short text from this period that has received little attention is Engels’s anonymous review of Marx’s A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy of 1859, the first instalment of the long-promised critical work. This lack of attention is unfortunate, because Engels’s brief notice represents a turning point in his thought, his career and in the Marx–Engels intellectual relationship as we see it. Though its direct influence has been limited and its effect on the contemporary Marx–Engels relationship very slight (so far as we know), the text is our first actual record of an important development in Engels’s ideas that presaged the most influential works of the Marxist tradition—Anti-Dühring, Socialism, Utopian and Scientific, Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy—all by Engels. While socialists, communists and even self-confessed Marxists paid lip-service to the power of Capital, Marx’s magnum opus, it was these works that were most widely read and whose tenets were passed on in lectures, primers and handbooks, down to official Soviet dialectics. Even more importantly, in his short review Engels initiated the Marxist philosophical tradition itself, and what has become the standard mould for interpreting Marx’s life and thought, used by pro- and anti-Marxists and by academic commentators alike. All these developments, of incomparable significance for our social and political life today, can be traced to Engels’s review of August 1859.

Marx wanted publicity for his A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, and he wrote to Engels on 19 July 1859 saying that Das Volk would do a review but that he did not trust the editor Eduard Biskamp, who ‘knows nothing about the subject’. Marx asked if Engels could write this review, and inquired again on 22 July: ‘You have forgotten to write to me whether you would do the review of my book… In case you do write something, don’t forget 1) that Proudhonism is nipped in the bud. 2) that the character of bourgeois production, which is specifically social and by no means absolute, is analysed in its simplest form, that of the commodity’. Marx explained that ‘Herr [Wilhelm] Liebknecht [fellow communist and participant in the 1848–49 events] has told Biskamp that “never has a book so frustrated him”, and Biskamp himself has said to me that he does not see “the good of it”’. Engels promised to do the article ‘next week’, because it would be a job requiring notice—he had also seen the ‘completely mangled advertisements’ for the book in two newspapers, so evidently he took Marx’s point with some enthusiasm (MEW 29.460, 463, 464).

Engels sent the beginning of his article to Marx on 3 August and reported on a delay on the 10th. No substantive comment (other than a plea for speed) survives in Marx’s letters for the month. Engels’s review appeared in two parts—a promised third section dealing with Marx’s achievements in economic theory in detail never emerged.

Using the outlook of The German Ideology, the Communist Manifesto, and his own historical work in The Peasant War in Germany and Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany, Engels approached Marx’s critique of political economy
through German economic history from the seventeenth century, because ‘political economy is the theoretical analysis of modern bourgeois society and therefore presupposes developed bourgeois conditions’. These were slow in taking shape in Germany because of the separation of Holland and the devastation of the civil wars. England, France and Holland forged ahead in trade, colonisation and manufacturing, until England alone attained the foremost position, ‘owing to steam power which only then began to impart value to its coal and iron deposits’. No German political economy was possible, concluded Engels, while Germans were still struggling against ‘ludicrously antiquated relics of the Middle Ages’ such as customs barriers and idiotic trade regulations. Up to 1830 these circumstances ‘laid fetters on the material bourgeois development of Germany’ (SW 1.366). In his Preface to the work under review, Marx had commented on ‘relations of production’ that turn from ‘forms of development of productive forces into their fetters’ (SW 1.363). Engels was thus preparing his readers for Marx’s ‘guiding thread’, which he quoted explicitly, and for Marx’s critique, which he identified as the ‘scientific, independent German economics’ dating precisely, so Engels said, from the (unspecified) moment when ‘the German proletarian party appeared on the scene’ (SW 1.368).

In the 1859 review Engels described Marx’s economics as new because it ‘is grounded essentially upon the materialist conception of history’, the first usage of this phrase. Marx had made a revolutionising discovery which Engels quoted from the Preface: ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general’. This was applicable, according to Engels, not merely to economics but to ‘all historical sciences’, by which he presumably meant social sciences, since he claimed, somewhat mysteriously, that ‘all sciences which are not natural sciences are historical’ (SW 1.368). (Physics and chemistry might count as non-historical natural sciences; unlike geology and natural history – which are historical, though not about society.)

Even more curiously Engels wrote that the basic proposition of this ‘materialist conception of history’ is ‘so simple that it must be self-evident’: this proposition was Marx’s very general summary that ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness’. For Engels the value of this discovery lay in comprehending and deriving truths about any society in history. In his view, Marx’s proposition meant ‘that all the social and political relations, all religious and legal systems, all the theoretical outlooks which emerge in history, are to be comprehended only when the material conditions of life of the respectively corresponding epochs are understood and the former are derived from these material conditions’. Moreover his notion of what to do with Marx’s insight was at an obviously academic remove from the actual politics of their party, though he claimed somewhat vaguely that ‘the basic outlook runs like a red thread’ through all its ‘literary productions’. Engels suggested that the real scientific work to be done (which demanded ‘years of tranquil study’) was the development of the materialist conception with respect to historical examples. He dealt with the practical consequences of the materialist conception of history in a summary manner, merely quoting the passage from Marx’s ‘guiding thread’ on social revolution. Yet even that was presented by Engels as a ‘perspective’ that ‘unfolds itself before us’ (SW 1.368–9).

The intention of Engels’s remark that the materialist conception of history is ‘self-evident’ was to ridicule those ‘bemused by idealist delusions’. Idealism was then his chosen target, though he did not explain precisely why he was attacking a philosophical doctrine as such. What he did claim is that the new outlook ‘runs directly counter to all idealism, even the most concealed’. Evidently the ‘whole traditional mode of political reasoning’, the ‘representatives of the bourgeoisie’, the ‘French Socialists’ and the ‘German vulgar-democratic vociferators’, so Engels claimed, participated in idealist delusions and had, at the same time ‘attempted to exploit [Marx’s] new ideas in plagiaristic fashion’. Philosophical idealists, it seems, had some of the same characteristics for Engels as ‘our party’: both made their marks, depending on circumstances, in the study and on the political stage (SW 1.368–9). Moreover the new treatment of economics bore another important similarity to the great works of idealist philosophers. To develop that point Engels appealed explicitly.
to Hegel. This tradition – that one approaches Marx’s work through a study of Hegel – was first established in Engels’s review.

Engels took Marx’s mature critique of political economy (the first published portion of which was the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* under review) to be ‘a systematic integration of the whole complex of economic science [and] … at the same time a criticism of the whole of economic literature’. Then Engels implied that Hegel’s work (without specifying any particular books at this stage) was the model for this kind of enterprise – the development of ‘a science in its own inner interconnection’ (SW 1.370). Hegel’s own approach to philosophy and logic might have served Engels in developing this alleged analogy with Marx, since Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, for example, presents a systematic account of logic as a whole, with Hegel’s own critical improvements and philosophical gloss on the works of other authorities.

Instead of establishing his case with respect to Hegel and Marx, Engels rushed to ridicule the ‘official Hegelian school’ which ‘had appropriated from the dialectic of the master only the manipulation of the simplest of all tricks’. In Engels’s view the achievements of Hegel were eclipsed by the ‘ludicrous clumsiness’ of his followers, by the transformative criticism of Feuerbach (who ‘declared speculative conceptions untenable’), and by ‘the powerful bourgeois development after 1848’, not least in industry and science. Engels took the approach of natural scientists to be gratifyingly non-idealist but disappointingly un-Hegelian. Their ‘natural-scientific materialism’ (‘almost indistinguishable theoretically from that of the eighteenth century’) unfortunately presupposed ‘fixed categories rather than a speculative tendency’. A ‘speculative tendency’ as happily developed in idealist philosophy, was able to leap ‘the ditch which separates essence from appearance, cause from effect’.

Rather eccentrically Engels referred to the un-Hegelian belief in fixed categories (a view that concepts have determinate, unvarying referents) as ‘the old metaphysics’. This ‘metaphysics’, according to Engels, was reflected in certain philosophical works of the last century or so, notably those by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Ludwig Büchner (1824–99) and Jakob Moleschott (1822–93). It was also reflected in the works of ‘the bourgeois economists’ (including, presumably, the English and French authorities who wrote long before 1848) as well as in contemporary works by Engels’s fellow-countrymen. For contemporary German attempts to contribute to economic science, which dated from the establishment of the Customs Union in 1834, Engels had nothing but the scorn he had formerly poured on German literary efforts:

Presently the learned fraternity and the bureaucracy seized hold of the imported material and worked it up in a fashion not very creditable to the ‘German spirit’. From the medley of high-class swindlers, merchants, schoolmasters and bureaucrats dabbling in authorship there arose thereupon a German economic literature which in its insipidity, shallowness, lack of thought, verbosity and plagiarism was paralleled only by the German novel (SW 1.367, 370–1).

Engels dismissed the ‘metaphysics’ of fixed categories as ‘annihilated theoretically by Kant and particularly by Hegel’. Natural scientists, philosophers and bourgeois economists had simply failed to grasp the philosophical (albeit idealist) critique of the ‘wolffian-metaphysical method’. In fact, idealism fell right out of fashion, according to Engels, when ‘Germany plunged into the natural sciences with quite extraordinary energy’ after 1848 (SW 1.371–2). The strict correlations between economic innovation, on the one hand, and theoretical and political developments on the other, recalls the treatment of revolutionary prospects in Europe in Engels’s ‘Principles of Communism’ (which seems to have been revised by Marx into the more subtle analysis of the Communist Manifesto).

Unsurprisingly Engels’s alternative to this alleged metaphysics of fixed categories was not Hegelianism itself, because it ‘was essentially idealistic’, took ‘pure thinking as its start’, and ‘… came from nothing through nothing to nothing’ on its own admission (no reference was provided here by Engels). Yet logically Hegelianism was far superior to its rival, Engels argued, though ‘absolutely unusable in its available form’. An appropriate use for the logical content of Hegelianism was in
solving this problem. ‘How was science to be treated?’ (SW 1.371–2). Not, it should be noted, how was science to be done?

What Engels had in mind was the development of a science in its own inner interconnection on the model of Hegel’s encyclopedic treatment of all the sciences of his time – philosophical, historical and natural – for which he used his ‘Hegelian method’ (SW 1.370, 372). Political economy was merely one of those sciences and it had, indeed, been treated by Hegel himself in his Philosophy of Right. Thus Engels’s notion of the project, for which a revised Hegelianism was the appropriate method, was an interpretative, recapitulatory, critical, systematic treatment of all knowledge (since, in his view and Hegel’s, knowledge of any importance coincided with science broadly conceived, in the German manner, as Wissenschaft). Quite what the point of such an encyclopedic system would be was never demonstrated by Engels. He merely took it that this kind of exercise would in itself contribute to knowledge through its substantive interconnections between laws already established, and through its formulation of the principles that underlay the interconnections in the work itself. Engels’s view of the Marxian project was thus academic, philosophical, even quasi-Hegelian.

The required revision of Hegelianism comprised, according to Engels, the development of a world outlook more materialistic than any previous one [my italics], including, presumably, previous materialisms. Quite how this was possible was not explained. Because of his concept of Marx’s ultimate project (or at least the project allegedly implied by Marx’s critical work on political economy), Engels assigned to Marx a method that was said to be of ‘hardly less importance’ than his ‘basic, materialist outlook itself’ (SW 1.372, 373). Method emerged as Engels’s chief concern in putting Marx’s work across to an educated public.

Once Engels had left aside (temporarily) the nature of Marx’s materialistic revision of Hegel’s premises, he faced the daunting task of showing how Marx had extracted his new method from Hegelian logic. The ‘kernel’ of that dialectical logic, according to Engels, comprises ‘Hegel’s real discoveries in this sphere’, and Marx aimed to ‘reconstruct the dialectical method’. Once Marx had (in an as yet unspecified way) ‘divested’ Hegel’s method ‘of its idealistic trappings’, he had not merely produced, so Engels claimed, the method most suitable for developing a ‘science in its own inner interconnection’, but had revealed ‘the simple shape in which it [the dialectical method] becomes the only true form of development of thought’ (SW 1.370, 373). What this grand claim amounts to was not really specified, but it was presumably the way in which all ‘science’ was ‘to be treated’.

However far Engels intended to push his claims concerning this revision of Hegelian method, it is clear that methodology for him was a substantial part of Marx’s legacy, indeed the most substantial part, since its applicability was allegedly very wide, or possibly even universal (in some obscure sense). The ‘basic materialist outlook itself’ would hardly amount to much, on this view, were there no method that presupposed this (‘revolutionising discovery’ and actually led to results (SW 1.368, 373).

Curiously Engels fastened on the historical character of Hegel’s thought as the methodological feature that distinguishes it ‘from that of all other philosophers’, rather than Hegel’s more obviously innovative method of developing a succession of concepts, as in the Phenomenology of Mind (Sense-Certainty to Absolute Knowledge) and the Science of Logic (Being to Absolute Idea). Those two Hegelian works were the ones used by Marx in his own methodological inquiries in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and the Grundrisse notebooks of 1857–58. Nonetheless Engels was right in suggesting that Hegel’s philosophy has a historical character in scope and method that set him apart from other philosophers:

... Hegel – in contrast to his disciples – did not parade ignorance, but was one of the finest intellects of all time. He was the first who attempted to show a development, an inner coherence, in history; and while today much in his philosophy of history may seem peculiar to us, yet the grandeur of his fundamental outlook is admirable even today, whether one makes comparison with his predecessors or, to be sure, with anyone who, since his time, has indulged in general reflections concerning history. Everywhere, in his Phenomenology, Esthetics, History of Philosophy, this magnificent conception of
Engels commented further that for Hegel world history was the ‘test’ of his philosophical conception. Test, however, implies a criterion by which a theory should be adjusted, and this was not Hegel’s view. But Engels observed with some justification that the ‘real content of historical events entered everywhere into the philosophy’, though he added that ‘the real relation was inverted and stood on its head’. This was probably a mystifying reference by Engels to Hegel’s idealism, rather than to Hegel’s alleged use of history as a test (SW 1.372).

Actually Hegel argued that his account of history relied on a purely philosophical proof which was confirmed by all actual events – just the reverse of what Engels claimed. Hegel wrote in the Philosophy of History that ‘the only Thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History, is the simple conception of Reason’. Reason is thus ‘the sovereign of the World’; and the history of the world is a ‘rational process’. According to Hegel, this is a ‘hypothesis in the domain of history as such’, but in that of Philosophy, ‘it is no hypothesis’. In Philosophy it is proved by ‘speculative cognition’ that Reason underlies ‘all the natural and spiritual life which it originates’. This is the thesis. Hegel concluded that ‘has been proved in Philosophy’, and is here in the Philosophy of History ‘regarded as demonstrated’ (Hegel (1837/1956), 9–10).

At the same time Hegel recognised the possible charge that he was merely applying a priori conceptions to history and thus forcing historical facts into a preconceived mould, but in his defence he appealed to natural science:

"The investigator must be familiar a priori (if we like to call it so), with the whole circle of conceptions to which the principles in question belong – just as Kepler (to name the most illustrious example in this mode of philosophising) must have been familiar a priori with ellipses, with cubes and squares, and with ideas of their relations, before he could discover, from the empirical data, those immortal ‘Laws’ of his."

‘In this very process of scientific Understanding’, Hegel concluded, the essential must be distinguished from the ‘so-called non-essential’. But in the history of the world it is the ‘Consciousness of Freedom, and the phases which this consciousness assumes in developing itself’, that is essential; this distinction enables the Hegelian philosopher to make a ‘scientific’ discrimination (Hegel (1837/1956), 63–5). Thus the history presented by Hegel was tested by philosophy, not the philosophy by history.

Engels misinterpreted Hegel’s use of history in relation to his philosophical conception. The philosophical conception was, in Hegel’s eyes, proved already, and historical events merely confirmed this. But having introduced Hegel’s conception of the relation between philosophy and history (albeit erroneously), Engels created two problems for himself: the substitution for Hegel’s premised idealism of a ‘world outlook’ that was ‘more materialistic’; and the delineation of the correct relationship between historical events and their ‘reflection’ in ‘abstract and theoretically consistent form’ (as allegedly found in Marx’s work) (SW 1.372–3). Once those problems were solved to his satisfaction, Engels could then progress in his 1859 review to the method used by Marx. This was the method, so Engels claimed, for presenting scientifically, that is materialistically, logically and dialectically, a given social relation in its historical context.

By remarking that in Hegel’s idealist philosophy ‘the real relation was inverted and stood on its head’, Engels the materialist made himself less than clear, since he failed to specify the terms of the relation and the way that they were related so that we could know what was inverted and what was stood on its head. The inversion metaphor derives from Feuerbachian criticism of Hegel and was employed by Engels in his ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’ written in 1843:

"Thus everything in economics stands on its head. Value, the primary factor, the source of price, is made dependent on price, its own product. As is well known, this inversion is the essence of abstraction; on which see Feuerbach (CW 3.427)."

And in the ‘Condition of England. The Eighteenth Century’, written in early 1844, Engels commented:
Bentham here [in his utilitarian 'greatest happiness' principle] makes the same error in his empiricism as Hegel made in his theory; he does not seriously try to overcome the contradictions, he turns the subject into the predicate, subordinates the whole to the part and in so doing stands everything on its head (CW 3.486).

Evidently the inversion metaphor was intended to cover a multitude of sins characteristically though not exclusively practised by idealists; those sins were specified to some degree in Engels’s early works. But in his 1859 criticisms Engels was so vague about the real relation involved that the metaphor is meaningless and the point of the criticism obscure. He was probably referring to the ‘real relation’ between ‘being’ and ‘consciousness’ that he had quoted from Marx’s 1859 Preface. But though Engels perhaps took the non-inverted relationship to be the determination (in a sense unspecified by Engels or Marx) of ‘consciousness’ by ‘social being’, he also took the latter to be material in itself and dichotomously opposed to consciousness (SW 1.368, 372).

Within the 1859 review Engels sometimes seems to have meant by ‘materialist conception’ a view that social production is crucial when men (who are both conscious and material) make their own history. This was a view developed most notably in The German Ideology and always maintained by Marx. But Engels also referred in the 1859 review to the materialist conception as one in which ‘it is demonstrated in each particular case how every time the action originated from direct material impulses and not from the phrases that accompanied the action’ (SW 1.369). This was a marked departure from both his own previous ideas, and Marx’s.

Quite what ‘material’ was intended to mean in this new context is far from clear, but the juxtaposition of ‘material impulses’ with ‘the phrases that accompanied the action’ suggests something rather more like the matter–consciousness dichotomy generally employed by natural scientists than the thesis in The German Ideology that ‘consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process’. In The German Ideology the matter–consciousness dichotomy was itself presented as ideological, in so far as an idealist realm of consciousness (a

‘heaven’) independent of men’s real lives was postulated (CW 5.36).

While Engels certainly rejected idealism, his works after 1859 were ambiguous because of his failure to define precisely the ‘materialist’ nature of the ‘materialist conception of history’. He employed the matter – consciousness dichotomy as found in contemporary natural science (which distinguished between the two as different, or apparently different types of phenomena) and the ‘new’ materialism of The German Ideology, which related events and ideas to man’s productive development. In his ‘new’ materialism Marx did not take up a position on the matter – consciousness dichotomy, since what was important for him was the relationship between social being and consciousness, not their ultimate constituents, material or otherwise. In any case social being and consciousness were never defined dichotomously by Marx, since social being did not exclude ideas (used in practice), and consciousness (i.e. mere ideas) did not exclude a connection sooner or later with practical activities.

Contrary to Marx’s discretion, Engels introduced an ontological issue into his account of the new outlook that was not a problem in The German Ideology nor in Marx’s other works, namely the implications of the matter – consciousness debate for the study of history and contemporary society. In what way could political ‘action’ be linked to ‘material impulses’ which are, following the matter – consciousness dichotomy, exclusive of ‘phrases’ or ‘consciousness’ or ‘ideas’? Engels never resolved this problem in his successive accounts, begun in 1859, of the basic materialist outlook.

Marx’s ‘new’ materialism, as he identified it in the Theses on Feuerbach, had in fact sidestepped the matter – consciousness dichotomy by making it irrelevant to his theories of society and social change. In opposition to ‘all previous materialism’ which accepted a matter – consciousness dichotomy, Marx founded his first proposition on ‘the mode of production of material life’, i.e. what men do in ‘social production’ (CW 5.3; SW 1.362–3). Significantly, in explicating Marx’s more specific view of the role of the ‘mode of production of material life’ within ‘social being’ itself, Engels dropped the term ‘mode of production’ and substituted ‘material conditions of life’ as the
basis from which ‘epochs are understood’, and then ‘all the social and political relations, all religious and legal systems, all the theoretical outlooks which emerge in history’ are ‘comprehended’ (SW 1.368). This marks a halfway point in the (apparently unconscious) transformation of Marx’s man-centred formulations (‘social being’, ‘mode of production’) into Engels’s obscurely ‘materialist’ account in which ‘phrases accompany the action’ which originates from ‘direct material impulses’. All these terms remained sublimely undefined in Engels’s work, and it seems that he was unaware of the problems intrinsic to concepts such as ‘material impulses’ and ‘action’, and by the relationship between his new terms and Marx’s. By implying that the matter – consciousness dichotomy was relevant in interpreting Marx’s concept of social being as materialist, Engels unnecessarily identified Marx’s theories with a view in natural science that material and conscious phenomena are, or merely appear to be, ultimately distinct, and did nothing to clarify the ontological relationship between the two categories, save to reject an idealist view that matter is in some sense an emanation of consciousness.

The ‘materialist outlook’ itself was in any case subordinated by Engels to ‘the method which forms the foundation of Marx’s criticism of political economy’. This emerged, in Engels’s account, as the ‘logical method’, and it, like the ‘materialist outlook’, also derived from Hegel’s ‘magnificent conception of history’: Hegel’s ‘epoch-making conception of history was the direct theoretical premise for the new materialist outlook, and this alone provided a connecting point for the logical method, too’. The ‘logical method’ arose from Engels’s consideration of the relationship between Hegel’s ‘thoughts’ and the ‘development of world history’. Hegel had used history, so Engels claimed, as the test of his philosophy by showing ‘a development, an inner coherence, in history’. Engels praised this method very highly in the 1859 text, while implying that the ‘inner coherence’ identified by Hegel could not be the correct one, because his idealist view that history was the realisation of an idea, namely freedom, was in Engels’s opinion quite erroneous. The logical method, however, was ‘simple’ and was, after some nugatory discussion, ‘nothing else but the historical method, only divested of its historical form and disturbing fortuities’. That method was applied by Marx to the ‘criticism of economics’, but was not by any means limited to such a project, in Engels’s view, since it was, after all, ‘the only true form of development of thought’ (SW 1.372–3).

How then were ‘disturbing fortuities’ to be sorted out from the ‘historical course’ of economic development in ‘abstract and theoretically consistent form’? According to Engels, a reflection was ‘corrected according to laws furnished by the real course of history itself’. He explained that the corrected reflection revealed ‘each factor’ in historical succession at ‘the point of development of its full maturity, of its classic form’. But that account linking mature factors together was to be obtained by using ‘laws’ which were nowhere defined in the 1859 text. And no laws were mentioned by Marx in his 1859 Preface (SW 1.373–4).

In support of his view Engels made two sweeping claims about history and political economy: 1) ‘in history... development as a whole proceeds from the most simple to the more complex relations’, and 2) the ‘literary reflection’ of history, including ‘the historical development of the literature of political economy’, also develops ‘from the most simple to the more complex relations’ (SW 1.373).

For neither of those claims was any evidence offered by Engels. The alleged facts in his two points, however, were the ones which were supposed to form the test (as in Engels’s view of Hegel’s method) that in a logical development of concepts (in this case the ‘economic categories’) it is ‘the actual development that is followed’. In that way Engels thought he had justified the presentation of ‘the economic categories as a whole... in the same sequence as in the logical development’ (SW 1.373–4).

It is possible that in formulating this argument Engels had in mind certain passages from the ‘general introduction’ which Marx told his readers had been scrapped in favour of the 1859 Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (SW 1.361). In his posthumously published ‘general introduction’ of 1857 Marx commented:

The economies of the seventeenth century, for example, always began with the living whole, the population, the nation, the state, more
states etc.; they always end, however, in such a way that they discover a few determining, abstract, universal relationships, like division of labour, money, value etc., through analysis. As soon as those individual moments were more or less fixed and abstracted, the economic systems which ascend from the simple [moment], such as labour, division of labour, need [and] exchange-value, up to the state, exchange among nations and the world market, began [to be formulated]. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method (Carver (1975), 72).

While we do not know whether Engels actually read this text, or had parts of it communicated to him verbally while Marx was at work, there is no reason to rule this out. But when Engels fastened on his ‘logical method’ as scientifically correct because it embodied a historical sequence from simple categories to complex ones (as mentioned in Marx’s 1857 ‘general introduction’), he did so in defiance of the conclusion to that discussion.

In the ‘general introduction’ Marx explored his initial view on scientific method very thoroughly: ‘However, do these simple categories not have an independent historical or natural existence before the more concrete categories? That depends.’ His crucial example was ‘labour’, which ‘appears to be a quite simple category’. Also, Marx continued, ‘the concept of it in that universality – as labour generally – is very old’. Nevertheless, he concluded, labour is ‘a modern category in the same way as the relations which produce that simple abstraction’ (Carver (1975), 74, 76). From his investigation of ‘labour’ Marx generalised as follows:

That example of labour shows strikingly how the most abstract categories themselves are, in the determinativeness of that abstraction itself – in spite of their validity for all epochs – their validity just on account of being abstractions – just as much the product of historical relations, and how they possess their full validity only for and within those relations (Carver (1975), 78).

And about the implications for his own critical work on political economy Marx was unequivocal:

Therefore it would be impracticable and false to let the economic categories succeed one another in the sequence in which they were the determining categories historically. Rather, their order of succession is determined by the relationship which they have to one another in modern bourgeois society, and that relationship is exactly the reverse of that which appears as their succession in accordance with nature or that which corresponds to the order of their historical development. We are not dealing with the relation [to each other] which the economic relations take up in the sequence of different forms of society… Rather [we are dealing] with their arrangement within modern bourgeois society (Carver (1975), 81).

Marx did not hold the view that the development of an economic category was necessarily a progression from simplicity to complexity, nor did he think that historical progression of categories (whether according to their first appearance or their importance in successive economic systems) was the proper model for his theoretical presentation. Rather he proposed to examine the economic categories which ‘constitute the inner arrangement of bourgeois society’, according to a plan which identified capital as ‘the economic power of bourgeois society, the power ruling over everything’. For that reason, he argued, ‘it must form the starting point’. And to explain capital, he began with the commodity and money (Carver (1975), 81–2, 134–6, 151–3).

While Marx observed a certain correspondence between logical and historical development, this was very much a subordinate point to the main argument rather than his organising principle. In his view there was never any possibility that the sequence commodity – money – capital could have appeared historically in some other order, since another order would be logically impossible. How could capital be what it is in a society without money, or money be money in a society without commodity production? Marx’s starting point in his critique of political economy was never identified with the presumed historical origins of capitalist society, and he only occasionally amplified his abstract ‘arrangement’ of the elements of capitalist society with historical asides (see, for example, CCPE 50–1).

When Engels wrote that the ‘chain of thought must begin with the same thing with which this history begins’, he ran directly counter to Marx. And he misconstrued Marx’s abstract arrangement of the essential elements of ‘the economic
conditions of life [in ... modern bourgeois society], because of his unwarranted assumption that historical development and 'literary reflection' advance from the most simple to the more complex relations. In fact Marx advised his readers in the 1859 Preface to 'be resolved to ascend from the particular to the general' as he moved from the commodity to money to capital (SW 1.361, 373).

Proceeding then from what he took to be the 'first and simplest' relation in history, Engels discerned a dialectical method in Marx's work: 'In this method we proceed from the first and simplest relation that historically and in fact confronts us; here, therefore, from the first economic relation to be found. We analyse this relation.' The recommended method was extraordinarily abstract and wholly without justification even as an a priori model for analysis: 'Being a relation of itself implies that it has two sides, related to each other. Each of these sides is considered by itself, which brings us to the way in which they behave to each other, their interaction. Contradictions will result which demand a solution.' Engels then announced that this was not 'an abstract process of thought taking place solely in our heads'; but, so he claimed, a 'real process which actually took place at some particular time or is still taking place.' These 'contradictions', he said, 'will have developed in practice and will probably have found their solution'. Even the form in which contradictions are resolved was specified in advance: 'We shall trace the nature of this solution, and shall discover that it has been brought about by the establishment of a new relation whose two opposite sides we shall now have to develop, and so on.' (SW 1.374).

Engels then praised Marx's presentation of the commodity not merely as a successful result of the dialectical method he had just outlined but as the correct solution to certain problems posed in political economy itself:

If now we consider commodities from their various aspects, commodities, to be sure, in their complete development and not as they first laboriously developed in the primitive barter between two primitive communities, they present themselves to us from the two points of view of use-value and exchange-value, and here we at once enter the sphere of economic dispute (SW 1.374).

While we might go on to agree with Engels that Marx's treatment of the commodity was 'as superior to the old, shallow, garrulous metaphysical method [of Adam Smith and others] as the railway is to the means of transport of the Middle Ages', it is difficult to see that Marx's procedure was successfully epitomised in Engels's schematic account, in which a commodity was said to be a relation which was then assumed to have two sides (use-value and exchange-value) which interact, producing contradiction and solution (the commodity as 'immediate unity of both') (SW 1.375). Marx's initial move in his 1859 A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, as in Capital, was to consider the 'wealth of bourgeois society', a particular 'unit' of which was the 'commodity'. He then clearly identified a commodity as a 'thing' and an 'object'. For Marx commodities were, of course, objects to which people have a relation; a commodity is an object 'of human wants, a means of existence ...' (CCPE 27).

Engels confused the purposely abstract character of Marx's presentation by introducing an irrelevant distinction between producer and consumer of commodities at this early stage of explication. The distinction was not present at all in Marx's opening chapter, because any given person might be both or either with respect to the commodity as a value-in-exchange, though not of course to any particular commodity at any one time. Otherwise, on Marx's definition, the object in question would not be a commodity. Inaccurately, then, Engels described something as a commodity when 'a relation between two persons or communities attaches to the thing, the product, the relation between producer and consumer who are no longer united in the same person'. But for Marx mere disjunction between producer and consumer was not the sufficient condition for commodity-exchange. Engels concluded, sweepingly, that 'economics deals not with things but with relations between persons'. He added moreover that those 'relations are ... always attached to things and appear as things', but he did not explain how exactly a relation may be 'attached' to a thing or 'appear' as a thing (SW 1.374).

Marx's careful analysis, which began with things and the relations in which people stand to them, has a clarity that quite escaped Engels. This makes it difficult to conclude with Engels
that it was the propositions about history, political economy and commodities that he had outlined in the 1859 review that enabled Marx to make 'the most difficult questions so simple and clear that now even the bourgeois economists will be able to grasp them' (SW 1.374). If Marx had in any sense accomplished that, it was not for the reasons given by Engels.

In his closing paragraph Engels returned to his theme that the theoretical and historical aspects of Marx's criticism of political economy proceeded in 'constant contact', something which was not true of Marx's account of the commodity in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, even taken in conjunction with the 'Historical Notes on the Analysis of Commodities' in which he gave an overt, critical treatment of the history of political economy, later dropped from the main text and squeezed into the footnotes of volume one of *Capital*. Engels's apparatus of historical and literary development was simply an inaccurate reflection of the true state of affairs in history, the literature of political economy and Marx's critique. His 'dialectical' method – imputing an ontology of relations, and a specific methodology of 'sides', 'interaction', 'contradiction' and 'solution' to Marx – was erroneous in its presuppositions about the plan of Marx's presentation and unhelpful in its formulation of an overly abstract and allegedly universal procedure (SW 1.374–5).

Engels's preoccupation with method – following a prescribed sequence, finding short-cuts, ordering knowledge and experience – was foreign to Marx. Marx's own methodological claims were profoundly modest, and the methods he employed in solving problems, even when characterised by him (very rarely) as dialectical, were irreducible to propositions and procedures of the sort offered by Engels.

Marx's actual method in dealing critically with political economy was eclectic and very complex. He used classical and Hegelian logic, and the techniques of mathematical, sociological, economic, historical and political analysis. These came into play when they were appropriate to the matter at hand. This eclectic method included a notion of dialectic as the specification of conflictual, development factors in analysing social phenomena, and we know that Marx found this helpful in dealing, for example, with the concepts of money and profit (see Carver (1976), 60–8). But neither 'dialectic' nor any other methodological formula represents a 'master-key' to Marx's work. He rightly denied that such master-keys were of any use to anyone when he wrote this letter in November 1877. In it he confirmed the rejection of a Hegelian-style 'philosophy of history' previously rejected in *The German Ideology* and implicitly rejected in earlier works:

Thus events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historical surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by using as one's master-key a general historicoc-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical (SC 313).

In particular, Engels's 1859 presentation of Marx's method failed to do justice to Marx's work, since Engels gave the reader the impression that Marx perceived idealism as inverted (without explaining what this means); that he ordered economic concepts from the simple to the complex as history (allegedly) dictates; and that he treated things and objects as relations in a ready-made dialectical fashion, i.e. sides, interaction, contradiction, solution.

When introducing Marx's critique of political economy Engels seemed to reminisce about the days of *The German Ideology* – the battles against idealism. But he adopted the Hegelian notion that science as *Wissenschaft*, including history, can be treated in its 'inner interconnection', and projected that encyclopedic preoccupation (erroneously) onto Marx. He further assumed (unnecessarily) that Marx's new materialism was predicated on the materialism of natural science, hence he attributed to Marx a social science which (ambiguously) did and did not presuppose the matter – consciousness dichotomy. Moreover to Marx he assigned (fictitiously) a plan and dialectical method which he never employed either explicitly or implicitly in his works. Significantly Marx was far more concerned to get on with the substance of his critical work on capitalist society than to explain his methodology, a project briefly mentioned in a letter to Engels of 16 January 1858 and never carried out.
In his apparent reminiscences about the crucial period of the 1840s – the 'self-clarification' arising out of The German Ideology of 1845–46 – Engels shifted the focus of this clarification from results to a re-engagement with the questions posed by Hegelian philosophers and with their philosophical answers. The German Ideology cut through those academic debates to the empirical establishment of premises for social science and political action that cannot reasonably be doubted. These premises were living individuals, their activities and the material surroundings in which activities, pre-eminently production, are carried on. From his point of view in 1859, Engels had not really denied those premises so much as re-opened the traditional debates with which the Young Hegelians, to Marx's fury, had been almost wholly preoccupied. From Engels's rehearsal of these philosophical debates emerged his materialism, which was close in many respects to being a simple reversal of philosophical idealism and a faithful reflection of the natural sciences as portrayed by positivists. Engels was seemingly unaware (or had he forgotten?) that The German Ideology had, in a sense, transcended those philosophical questions and their various philosophical solutions for new premises and, more importantly, new questions concerning the past, present and future development of society, particularly 'legal relations' and 'forms of state'. These were mentioned by Marx, in a part of the 1859 Preface not quoted by Engels, as the very problems to which the 'guiding thread' was addressed (SW 1:362). Thus Marx's work was transmogrified in Engels's 1859 review into the academic philosophy that the self-clarification of The German Ideology had triumphantly superseded.

Within the interpretative framework of the 1859 review Engels elevated method to a level of importance far higher than it assumed in any of Marx's very sparing comments on the subject. And within his account of Marx's allegedly 'true' methodology Engels placed particular emphasis on a debt to Hegel. Marx acknowledged a debt to Hegel some years later, in order to reply intelligently to critics who had raised the issue themselves, but his specification of the 'rational dialectic' was much less high-flown (and far more intelligible) than Engels's 'true form of development of thought' (see Carver (1982), 45–9).

Engels's emphasis on method over substance and his focus on Hegel's work as the *sine qua non* for getting to grips with Marx had profound intellectual consequences. He misrepresented Marx's enterprises as Hegelian in scope, and he initiated the now commonplace but profoundly academic view that a study of Hegel is essential to an understanding of Marx and his methods. In that way he set the pattern for almost all treatments, academic and otherwise, of Marx's lifework. Moreover the imposition of the categories materialism, idealism, dialectic, interaction, contradiction and reflection on Marx's work has redefined it as Marxist rather than strictly Marxian. In August 1859 Friedrich Engels invented dialectics, the progenitor of unresolvable ambiguities within the Marxist tradition.