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SYMPOSIUM REVIEW

Actuality of Friedrich Engels at his 200th Birthday: 7th Marxist Inquiries on Science & The School of Marxism and Sciences

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THE SEVENTH MEETING OF THE Marxist Inquiries on Science was held on 18-20 December 2020 with the theme of ‘Actuality of Friedrich Engels.’¹ First of all, I would like to share my reason for writing in an international journal on the last meeting of a symposium that has been organized in Turkey since 2012.

‘The Actuality of Friedrich Engels’ has been the most recent symposium of the series Marxist Inquiries on Science, that has been held since 2012. I have taken part in these events as both a member of the organizing committee and a presenter since 2015 when I was still a young graduate student. This last symposium, however, has been a turning point on the way of formation of the journal and its first special issue. More specifically, the decision to establish this journal and to publish the first issue with the main theme of the symposium was taken at the meeting of the organizing committee after the symposium.

Precisely for this reason, the history of the symposium has also been presented as the background of the journal at its website:

The seeds of Marxism & Sciences were planted at the first symposium of Marxist Inquiries on Science held in İzmir in 2012. The theme of the symposium, Is Marxism Alien to Science? was discussed in 20 paper presentations by different comrades from arts and humanities, applied, social and natural sciences. Around 60 participants attended the 3-day symposium.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/c/MarxismandSciences>

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We have organized seven annual meetings since 2012 and the papers presented at the first three symposiums have been published as three separate volumes. The School of Marxism and Sciences aiming to discuss Marxist approaches in each branch of science, was also organized in 2017, alongside the symposium.

2012- Is Marxism Alien to Science?

2013- Marxism and Two Cultures

2015- Marxist Interventions to Mainstream Science

2017- The School of Marxism & Sciences

2018- Understanding the World Today: Tendencies, Nodes and Exits in the 21st Century

2019- Looking at Today from the Interwar Period

2020- Actuality of Friedrich Engels at his 200th Birthday

So far 155 papers in total have been presented in the symposiums and the school; and the topics of political science, political economy, sociology, general philosophy, physics, mathematics, biology, philosophy of science, medicine, neuroscience, engineering, agriculture, architecture, literature, arts, musicology, ecology, religion, technology, international relations, film studies, theatre, cultural studies, fashion, history, anthropology, psychology and law have been discussed. Close to 600 people have participated in all these events.

Following the 2020 symposium, we came to the decision to continue organising the symposium internationally and publish an international journal both named Marxism & Sciences.²

The symposium began with an opening speech by Ali C. Gedik on behalf of the organizing committee and continued with his own presentation, ‘Actuality of Engels.’ In his presentation, Gedik addressed some of the criticisms raised against Engels as well as the reasons of the loss of connection between natural sciences and Marxism. He further stated that Engels’ approach to methodology and dialectics is still actual as it facilitates the reconstitution of the connection between natural sciences and Marxism as much as it contributes to a holistic understanding of Marxism—similar to Marx’s and Engels’ position.

The next presentation titled ‘Engels the Second Violin: Memories, Letters and Exercises on Music’ was made by Öznur Yılmaz. Yılmaz explained why Engels describes himself the second fiddle. The second fiddle has the task of filling in the gaps that were left by the first fiddle and determining the rhythm, while the first fiddle has the task of dragging the melody in a classical music orchestra. Although Engels considers himself

2. <https://marxismandsciences.org/history/>

secondary in his relationship with Marx, he also states later—after Marx’s death—that he is uncomfortable with the new situation, expecting him to be the first fiddle. Engels remarks the difficulty to accept to be the representative of Marxism in a theoretical sense after Marx’s death. Yılmaz pointed out that Engels’ second fiddle metaphor was not a coincidence. She pointed out that although Marx and Engels did not study music in a detailed manner, from the letters and writings of Engels, we can come to the conclusion that Engels was very interested in music. Engels constantly attended concerts and musical theaters and conveyed these experiences in letters to his sister and to Marx. Yılmaz stated that it is unfortunate that Marx and Engels did not write specifically on music, but their discussion with Stirner over the uniqueness of art in *The German Ideology* constitutes an important point of reference for a Marxist understanding of art and music.

Yılmaz’s presentation was followed by a short concert on Engels’ composition exercises. Before the performance of ‘Variations on Engels’ Compositional Experiments’, the composer Ömer Er touched upon the musical difficulties Engels faced. He stated that he internalized Engels and interpreted the work as his own, whilst trying to stay loyal to the compositions.

On the second day of the symposium, Kaan Kangal made a presentation on ‘Engels and the Dialectics of Nature.’ Kangal philosophically evaluated the writing process of *Dialectics of Nature*. Kangal stated that Engels never actually wrote a book titled *Dialectics of Nature*. In fact, the book known to us as the *Dialectics of Nature* is a compilation of Engels’ four scrolls of manuscripts about natural sciences and dialectics. He further added that Engels did not use the phrase ‘nature’s dialectic’ or ‘dialectic of nature’ in the main text of the book. He argued that Engels did not prefer the term, as it could lead to unintended speculations in terms of linguistic and terminological concerns. Engels put dialectics against metaphysics, and materialism against idealism in his notes on the *Dialectics of Nature*. According to Kangal, Engels tested dialectic with nature in *Dialectics of Nature*. Engels sought to answer which parts of objective logic are confirmed in natural movement and evolutionary processes. Engels could not conclude his investigation and left some parts unfinished. One of the reasons for lack of conclusion has been the successive progression of natural sciences. Another reason has been the philosophical terminology and the philosophical position that was adopted by Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*.

Engels had to discuss with different variants of idealism that were representatives of Aristotle, Kant and Hegel against materialism in *Dialectics of Nature*. This situation has yielded difficulties and confusions.

In his presentation titled 'From History and Class Consciousness to Ontology: The Problem of Dialectics of Nature', Ateş Uslu discussed Lukács's part in the criticisms of Dialectic of Nature and Engels in his presentation, titled 'Reading Engels with Lukács: From History and Class Consciousness to Ontology The Problem of Dialectic of Nature.' Lukács criticized Engels for allegedly applying dialectics to nature and this situation also influenced the next generation of Marxists. Uslu divided his presentation into two parts. The first part was on how the human subject was grounded from a Marxist perspective for the two different philosophers, and the second part was on how issues such as subjectivity, freedom and will were discussed on a materialist perspective by Engels and Lukács. Lukács developed a critique of positivism's conceptualization of society, which is similar to latter's conceptualization of nature and extended this criticism to Engels. According to Lukács, Engels did not take into account the dialectic between subject and object in the historical process, and extended and generalized the dialectic onto nature just like Hegel did. According to Uslu, Lukács accepted that the dialectic of nature exists, but he was primarily interested in the dialectic of society. Uslu stated that afterwards, Lukács's ideas have changed about Engels—especially after he read *Dialectics of Nature*—and the dialectic of nature became important for Lukács.

Another presentation, titled 'Dialectics in Thinking and Activity' was made by Siyaveş Azeri. Azeri discussed that Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* was misrepresented and misinterpreted, and what Engels really wanted to describe was the dialectic of human activity in nature. Azeri aimed at demonstrating that Engels, in *Dialectics of Nature* as much as in other works, conceptualized human activity (praxis) in concordance with the spirit of materialist dialectics (of Marx and his own) and that this conceptualization particularly preceded Ilyenkov's later approach to the concept of human activity. Azeri stated that Marx and Engels' approach consider nature through the prism of human activity in nature.

In the last presentation of the second day titled 'New Nature and Engels,' Alper Dizdar focused on how Engels' dialectical method, especially as it is deployed in *Dialectics of Nature* may be evaluated by scientists—particularly in natural sciences. According to Dizdar, it would be possible to progress much faster in scientific terms with the use and knowledge of

the dialectical methodology used by Engels in relation to natural sciences. For instance, according to Dizdar, if dialectic method had been used, physicists could advance much faster from the static universe model to the expanding universe model following the general theory of relativity. In addition, Dizdar addressed Engels' scientific and philosophical understanding of biology and mathematics. According to Dizdar, if we consider movement in nature and society, it is possible to see this relationship as dialectical on the basis of Engels' methodology.

On the last day of the symposium, I started off by mentioning the current negative consequences of the ecological crisis in my own presentation titled 'Engels and Ecology'. I tried to explain the place of ecology in Marxist literature and that Engels—and Marx—was one of the first philosophers to deal with ecological destruction from this point of view. Marxism is often accused by ecologists to not pay attention to ecology and for being anthropocentric. However, this idea has been dissipated and it has become clear that the ecocide is rooted in the capitalist mode of production, thanks to the eco-Marxists. Marx defined the interrelationship between human and nature with the concept of metabolism. However, human and nature have been alienated and have undergone a metabolic rift in capitalism. Nature has value only to the extent that it is dominated and taken into financial relations in capitalism. I tried to remark certain problems in the understanding of ecology of eco-Marxists and in general Marxist literature. I proposed—based on Marxist biologists—that the act of consuming the environment is not exclusive to humans and as an irreversible process includes every organism which is connected to the environment. Furthermore, I stated that the process of human's irreversible consumption of its own environment—unlike other organisms—is rooted in economic and social relations and that it is possible to constitute a more sustainable environment, in both intellectual and practical terms, through changing these same relations. Finally, I stated that human is the embodiment of this relationship, which is established in nature through labour in the ecological sense, as it is expressed by Engels in his *Dialectics of Nature*. According to Engels, human actions on nature had negative consequences on us as well as on nature. The harmony of our relationship with nature is possible not by trying to dominate it, but by accepting that we are a part of nature and recognizing its laws.

Çağatay Tarhan, in his presentation titled 'Engels, Biology and Covid-19' mainly focused on the importance of the *Dialectics of Nature* for the

actual biological developments. Tarhan stated that *Dialectics of Nature* served as a guide even though it was scientifically incomplete or outdated due to the limited knowledge of its period. Tarhan stated that the domination of scientific method by empiricism has caused a serious philosophical impoverishment. Therefore, Engels revealed philosophically in the *Dialectics of Nature* the necessity to combine empirical and dialectical methods. Tarhan mentioned that the gradual division of natural sciences into different branches prevents us from understanding accumulation of scientific knowledge from a holistic perspective. This situation—especially in biology—has yielded a gene-centred and reductionist approach. According to Tarhan, biology needs dialectical method in order to reach its aims. This situation coincides with Engels' idea that scientific progress can be accelerated with the use of dialectical method in sciences. Lastly, Tarhan emphasized the importance of the chapter titled 'The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man' in the *Dialectics of Nature* for biology. Engels sees the hand not only as an organ of labor, but also as its product. According to Tarhan, this view is an indication that Engels addresses not only social changes but also biological changes in humans.

The symposium continued with Melda Yaman's presentation titled, 'Looking at The Origin of Engels: A Socialist Feminist Perspective.' The *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is presented with a socialist feminist perspective, while following the traces of *The Origin*. Yaman stated that Engels' *The Origin* is a very valuable work for a socialist-feminist perspective, but also has certain aspects to be criticized. Yaman finally stated that despite the drawbacks of *The Origin*, it is still an important work that draws attention to the oppression of women by the male-dominated society in general.

The last presentation of the symposium was made by Şebnem Oğuz titled 'Actuality of the Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*.³ Oğuz stated that her main purpose was to discuss the work of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in relation to current conditions such as precarity, class and immigrant labor. Oğuz stated that Engels' work was the first book dealing with the working class as a whole. According to Oğuz, Engels' work retains its actuality in terms of the existing discussions related to the concept of precariat, the concept of surplus population and migrant labor, digital capitalism, the concept of social

3. Şebnem Oğuz, "Engels'in *İngiltere'deki İşçi Sınıfının Durumu* Üzerine Bir İnceleme," *Yeni Düşünce*, 2018, s. 10-15. *İngiltere'deki İşçi Sınıfının Durumu*, Engels'in *İngiltere'deki İşçi Sınıfının Durumu* kitabının bir bölümüdür.

murder, working conditions during the pandemic, and finally new forms of organization for the working class. Oğuz has described the current situation of the workers in detail, referring to the similar descriptions in Engels' work.

In 2020, the symposium 'Actuality of Friedrich Engels at his 200th Birthday' was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Engels' actuality, his composition exercises, his bond with nature, his contribution to Marxism, and his connection with natural and social sciences were discussed in the context of many actual issues during the 3-days meeting. Being the online symposium allowed Marxist academics abroad—such as Siyaveş Azeri from Siberia and Kaan Kangal from China—to made presentations. It provided a holistic approach to the actuality of Engels in this way. However, I still think that the fact that this symposium and the previous ones were held in Turkish hindered the participation of international Marxist scholars. In addition, I should state that the symposium could not adequately focus on Engels' position vis a vis natural science. There were not presentations on chemistry or mathematics, for example. This was in part due to the limited number of Turkish speaking academics interested in Engels' methodology and dialectics. Therefore, it has been decided that the symposium will be held internationally and in English in the following years.