

The Theoretical Connotation of Proletarian Revolutionary Thought in "The Condition of the Working Class in England"

Hongxia Wei, Hongjie Pei*

School of Marxism, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, Anhui 233030, China

*Corresponding Author: 1776593103@qq.com

Abstract

Through 21 months of firsthand observation and personal engagement, Engels wrote "The Condition of the Working Class in England," systematically portraying the multiple hardships endured by the British working class during the domestic crisis of the 1840s, and thereby clarifying the ideas of proletarian revolution. Engels argued that the profound suffering of the British working class was the catalyst for the outbreak of proletarian revolution. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the capitalist system, he revealed capitalism as the root cause of proletarian revolution, emphasizing that overthrowing capitalist private property through proletarian revolution is the only way to alleviate the deep suffering of the British working class. Through a thorough examination of the British labor movement, Engels highlighted that the historical course and trend of the British proletarian revolution lead toward communism.

Keywords

The Condition of the Working Class in England; proletarian revolutionary thought; labor movement; communism.

1. Introduction

In "The Condition of the Working Class in England," Engels systematically presented the idea of proletarian revolution through firsthand observations and reliable materials, emphasizing that the only path to the liberation of the proletariat lies in overthrowing capitalist private ownership through proletarian revolution, ultimately achieving the goal of communism. Studying the proletarian revolutionary ideas in "The Condition of the Working Class in England" holds profound theoretical significance and contemporary relevance.

The theoretical significance of "The Condition of the Working Class in England" was highly praised by Marx. "Since Friedrich Engels published his brilliant outline of the economic category (in the 'German-French Annals'), I have been constantly corresponding with him to exchange views. He reached the same conclusion as me through another path (refer to his 'The Condition of the Working Class in England') [1]."

Lenin emphasized that "The Condition of the Working Class in England" is "one of the outstanding works in the world's socialist literature [2]". In "Friedrich Engels", Lenin summarized the basic ideas in "The Condition of the Working Class in England" as the proletarian revolutionary ideology. "The proletariat is not merely a suffering class; it is precisely its lowly economic position that irresistibly propels it forward and forces it to strive for its ultimate liberation. And the proletariat in the midst of battle is capable of helping itself. The political movement of the working class will inevitably make the workers realize that apart from socialism, they have no other way out. On the other hand, socialism will only become a force when it becomes the goal of the political struggle of the working class [3]."

2. The Severe Hardships Endured by the British Working Class Were the Catalyst for the Outbreak of the Proletarian Revolution

Engels, starting from the situation of the British working class, comprehensively and critically exposed the darkness of capitalism and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. Engels extended from Britain to the entire world, and from the perspective of all humanity, contemplated the liberation cause of the proletariat. Engels straightforwardly pointed out, "The situation of the working class is the true foundation and starting point of all contemporary social movements, because it is the most acute and obvious manifestation of the most severe social disasters we currently face[4]."

Engels, through in-depth investigation and research, exposed that the British working class was in a state of total material poverty, facing forced labor and experiencing extreme mental suffering. Therefore, the profound hardships of the British working class could only be changed through the proletarian revolution to overthrow the capitalist system.

2.1. Total poverty in material life

Engels, through a wealth of facts and data, convincingly demonstrated that the working class in various industries in Britain was generally in a state of extreme poverty in terms of material life, which was mainly manifested in three aspects: extremely meager wages, poor dietary conditions, and poor living conditions.

Firstly, the wages are too meager. The working class in Britain lead a precarious life, with meager and unstable wages barely sufficient to sustain their livelihood. Any unforeseen circumstances could leave the British working class destitute. The working class in Britain is in a desperate situation where they are constantly at risk of going hungry.

Secondly, the dietary conditions were extremely poor. The working class in Britain lived in an absolutely impoverished state in terms of food. On one hand, the working class in Britain had no money to purchase better food, and the poor dietary conditions led to widespread malnutrition and digestive system diseases among the working class. On the other hand, merchants and factory owners did not care about the health of consumers at all. To make profits, they adulterated all kinds of food, cheated customers by selling inferior products as good ones, and engaged in various forms of commercial fraud, which further exacerbated the poor dietary conditions of the working class.

Thirdly, the living conditions are extremely poor. The poor living conditions of the British working class are a joint result of the poverty of the British working class and the ecological crisis caused by the Industrial Revolution. On one hand, poverty forces the British working class to generally live in damp, cold, and dirty houses, which are inherently unsuitable for habitation. On the other hand, major cities suffer from severe pollution, with large factories conducting industrial production, resulting in severe air pollution. The garbage and stagnant water ponds in the urban working areas cause the most adverse public health consequences, further exacerbating the poor living conditions of the British working class.

2.2. The cruel torture of forced labor

The British working class not only endured material poverty but also endured the absolutely compulsory excessive labor at work. Engels exposed the adverse effects of forced and excessive labor under the factory system on the physical and mental health of the British working class, and condemned the disastrous consequences of the factory system. The British working class faced severe hardships such as long working hours, poor working conditions, risking their lives, and suffering psychological abuse.

The factory system embodies the systematic and institutionalized exploitation of capitalist private ownership. The factory system is the "tool" by which capitalists "manage" workers.

Capitalists have established strict regulations, confining workers' activities within the framework of machine production, turning workers into truly "living machines"[5].

Firstly, the working hours were excessively long. Engels documented the working hours of the British working class, not only for adult male and female workers, but even for child workers, who were required to work sixteen hours a day. The prolonged and excessive labor severely damaged the health of the British working class. Most workers became so physically weak after several years of factory labor that they were no longer able to work.

Secondly, the working environment was extremely poor. Engels, through in-depth investigation of the working conditions in various labor sectors, concluded that almost every department of the British working class was operating in an overly harsh environment, which exacerbated the deterioration of the physical condition of the British working class. The air environment in factories led to serious chronic diseases, especially in the cotton textile industry and mining, which severely damaged the lung health of the British working class. The long-term assembly line work of the British working class caused serious physical deformities.

Thirdly, facing life-threatening situations. The working class in Britain was constantly exposed to serious workplace injuries under the factory system, and they were constantly at risk of losing their lives. Engels documented numerous shocking cases where workers in the factory system suffered severe injuries and even lost their lives due to work-related accidents.

Fourth, enduring psychological abuse. Under the factory system, the British working class did not engage in free, conscious, and self-developing labor; instead, it was subjected to compulsory labor for survival. During the process of compulsory labor, the British working class was forced to engage in excessive labor that went against their own will day after day, causing long-term and intense psychological pain for the British working class. The damage to the mental health of the British working class caused by compulsory labor and excessive labor is irreversible and destructive.

2.3. Extreme suffering in the spiritual realm

Engels paid great attention to the spiritual world of the British working class. Engels pointed out that in the absence of cultural education, the British working class could not feel happy, and they were in a state of intense spiritual oppression.

Firstly, the lack of cultural education. The British bourgeoisie, in the educational sphere, enslaved the British working class with the intention of maintaining their own rule. The British bourgeoisie only allowed the British working class to receive education that met the needs of the bourgeoisie, hoping that the British working class would be immersed in the religious ideology and religious hatred instilled by the church, remaining in an isolated and atomized state, unable to think about the tragic fate of their own because of the oppression by the bourgeoisie and the exploitation of the capitalist system, thus unable to consciously recognize their tragic fate and ultimately completely submit to the rule of the bourgeoisie.

Secondly, the extreme suppression of the spiritual world. Engels paid great attention to the mental health issues of the British working class. He pioneered the viewpoint that the moral corruption and the bad habits of excessive drinking and indulgence among the British working class were not the result of their own decline, but the inevitable consequence of the systematic oppression by the capitalist system. Under the capitalist system, the British working class endured physical illnesses caused by poverty and harsh environments, and spiritually saw no way out. They had no leisure time for free and conscious labor, and ultimately could only escape the pain of reality through excessive drinking and indulgence.

3. The Capitalist System Is the Fundamental Cause of the Proletarian Revolution

Engels deeply analyzed the institutional roots that caused the severe hardships of the British working class. Under capitalist private ownership, the exploitation suffered by the British working class deepened with the development of the capitalist system. The bourgeoisie used the legal system to conduct systematic economic and political exploitation of the British working class, and then through the institutionalized humiliation of the apprenticeship system, pushed the British working class to the brink of desperation. Capitalist private ownership was the blatant social murder and social war carried out by the British bourgeoisie against the British working class. The British bourgeoisie forced the British working class into a desperate situation where they either committed suicide or engaged in revolution. Therefore, the proletarian revolution was the only choice for the British working class under capitalist private ownership.

3.1. Capitalist private ownership is the fundamental cause of the proletarian revolution

Engels comprehensively expounded the relationship between the history of the British working class and capitalist private ownership from a macro perspective. The history of the British working class advanced along with the development of the Industrial Revolution. The development of the Industrial Revolution led to the transformation of the civil society, thereby promoting the continuous development of capitalist private ownership, and ultimately forming a typical country for the development of the proletariat. Engels pointed out, "Only in Britain can the proletariat be placed within all its social relations and studied from all aspects[6]." Engels, based on an in-depth study of the conditions of the British working class, delved into the real contradictions of British society, exposed the sharp contradictions of British society under capitalist private ownership, and had a tremendous world-historical significance for completely destroying capitalist private ownership through the proletarian revolution.

Before the development of the Industrial Revolution led to the widespread application of machines and the eventual formation of capitalist private ownership, the British working class was scattered and possessed the means of production. The local market still held a decisive significance for the demand for cloth. Therefore, the British working class was neither proletarians nor did they suffer from the intense competition under private ownership. Their political and economic status was one level higher than that of the British workers under capitalist private ownership.

Engels took the British working class as an example and expounded on the world-historical significance of the Industrial Revolution for the liberation of the proletariat from a global historical perspective. Engels pointed out, "On the one hand, the British working class before the Industrial Revolution lived a comfortable and pleasant life and was reluctant to abandon this way of life voluntarily. On the other hand, they were indeed not human beings but merely a machine working for the few nobles who had always dominated history [7]." Therefore, Engels clarified the significant impact of the inherent contradictions inherent in capitalist private ownership in the context of the Industrial Revolution on the British working class, "The Industrial Revolution merely brought this situation to its extreme, turning the workers into simple machines completely, depriving them of the last remnants of independent activity. However, precisely because of this, the Industrial Revolution also forced them to think and prompted them to strive for the position that humans should have [8]." In conclusion, the Industrial Revolution in Britain and capitalist private ownership pushed the British working class to increasingly care about the common interests of humanity and achieve the liberation of the proletariat.

Engels specifically analyzed how the development of the Industrial Revolution led to the advancement of private ownership, forcing the British working class to become slaves to machines. Engels used the example of the Jenny spinning machine. The use of the Jenny spinning machine prompted textile workers to eventually abandon agriculture and the outdated spinning wheel, and families that couldn't afford the Jenny spinning machine were forced to rely on the looms of their employers, completely becoming proletarians. The Jenny spinning machine was the starting point of how the Industrial Revolution promoted the development of capitalist private ownership and made the British working class become proletarians. The Jenny spinning machine was the initial manifestation of the differentiation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The continuous development of industry has driven the technological progress of the Jenny spinning machine. Under the competition of capitalist private ownership, machines would become outdated at any time. Therefore, capitalists began to utilize water power, and individual spinners eventually lost their means of production and were hired by capitalists. The technological changes of the Jenny spinning machine laid the foundation for the emergence of the factory system. Eventually, due to the continuous emergence of new inventions, "machine labor defeated manual labor in all major sectors of British industry. From then on, the entire history of British industry tells the story of how handicraft workers were driven out of their positions by machines [9]." Engels used the Jenny spinning machine as the research object, fully demonstrating that the machine brought about tremendous changes in the lower-level social relations.

Engels, through a detailed examination of the development history of British industry, pointed out that "the significance of the Industrial Revolution for Britain is similar to that of the political revolution for France and the philosophical revolution for Germany [10]." He emphasized that "the most important product of this industrial transformation is the British proletariat [11]." Under capitalist private ownership, factories dominated the lower-level social relations, and workers had no other way out but to remain proletarians for their entire lives.

3.2. The direct manifestation of capitalist private ownership is the legal system

Engels delved into the legal system and exposed that capitalist law is a tool for safeguarding the interests of the bourgeoisie and a whip for oppressing the proletariat. The legal system of the bourgeoisie uses superficial forms of equality to conceal the actual inequality under capitalist private ownership, and it is a highly sophisticated and institutionalized form of exploitation.

First, a tool for concealing class oppression. The British bourgeoisie emphasized equality and freedom, but this was achieved through deceptive means in the guise of superficial equality, to conceal the blatant class oppression. The British bourgeoisie declared in the form of law that the interests of the bourgeoisie represented the interests of the entire country, and the law protected the interests of the British working class, thereby concealing the absolute power held by the British bourgeoisie in the capitalist system, which was in an absolute dominant position within the legal system. Under the capitalist legal system, the British working class had no political rights at all.

Second, the direct tool of class oppression. The British bourgeoisie ruled through the so-called legal spirit, concealing class oppression and punishing the resistance of the British working class under the guise of illegality. The law was the whip used by the British bourgeoisie to suppress the British working class.

Third, the institutionalized humiliation in the workhouse. The British working class had no guarantees in the capitalist society and were regarded as superfluous individuals. Engels pointed out, "Those who lived in the workhouse often deliberately committed crimes in order to be able to enter prison [12]." The workhouse fully demonstrated that in British society, poverty was punished as a crime, and the British working class was subjected to

institutionalized humiliation in both material and spiritual aspects. The living conditions in the workhouse were even worse than those of the Bottom-level workers, and the treatment was even worse than that in prisons. Poor people could be abused at any time.

3.3. The essence of the capitalist system is social murder and social warfare

Engels eventually concluded that the essence of the capitalist system was a social murder and social war launched by the British bourgeoisie against the British working class. The British working class was not directly killed by violence and no direct perpetrator could be found. However, the British working class was oppressed to death under the capitalist system. The entire capitalist system under the rule of the bourgeoisie was the perpetrator of social murder. The British bourgeoisie only cared about their own interests and profits, and did not care about the situation of the British working class. Therefore, the British bourgeoisie launched a social war against the British working class.

4. The Historical Process and Trend of The British Proletarian Revolution Is Towards Communism

Engels based the theory of the proletarian revolution on the reality and practice of the British workers' movement. The cruel oppression of the capitalist system pushed the British working class from material poverty and extreme mental suffering to beginning to resist capitalist private ownership. From crime to the Chartist Movement, it was the process of the British working class constantly moving from disorder to order, from individual to collective, and from blind struggle to organized struggle. During the struggle, the British workers continuously recognized the exploitative nature of capitalist private ownership and their class consciousness gradually awakened. Engels highly affirmed the revolutionary potential of the Chartist Movement. With the continuous development of the British workers' movement and the intensification of contradictions in the capitalist system, the proletarian revolution was bound to succeed and ultimately achieve the lofty goal of communism.

4.1. The Progress of the Workers' Movement - From Crime to the Chartist Movement

Engels highly affirmed that the British working class consciously formed revolutionary consciousness during their constantly developing spontaneous struggles. "The British believed that politics only existed for the benefit of the bourgeois society. They did not fight against the government but directly against the bourgeoisie. This struggle could only be effective through peaceful means temporarily [13]." The Chartist Movement was the first attempt by the entire British working class to demand changes to the capitalist system, and it contained revolutionary potential. Engels emphasized, "The proximity of the Chartist Movement to socialism is inevitable [14]."

4.1.1. Crime: Spontaneous Resistance to Capitalist Private Ownership

Engels pointed out, "The earliest, most primitive and least effective form of this resistance is crime [15]." By committing theft to oppose the existing social system, the bourgeoisie would easily overcome it with the huge advantage of all social power. Blind anger cannot change capitalist private ownership or the tragic fate of the British working class. Workers began to gather and smash machines in the Luddite movement to oppose the factory system. The Luddite movement was the first step for the British working class to move from blind anger to spontaneous struggle. The British working class's struggle first manifested as direct resistance against the factory system, initially demonstrating the class consciousness of the British working class awakening and its initiative as a revolutionary subject. Engels highly praised the Luddite movement for its pioneering symbolic significance, "The workers' first resistance

against the bourgeoisie occurred in the early stage of the industrial movement, that is, when workers used violence to oppose the use of machines [16]." Therefore, the Luddite movement marked that the struggle of the British working class entered a new stage, and the British working class began to realize: "Workers have no other way to express their dignity as human beings except to resist for the improvement of their entire living conditions. There is no other way for them to do so [17]."

4.1.2. Strike struggle: Conscious resistance to capitalist private ownership

The failure of the Luddite movement prompted the working class to explore more sustainable forms of struggle at the organizational level. The British working class further realized that they must unite to resist the exploitation of the factory system. Strike struggles were of great significance to the workers' movement.

Firstly, strikes have played a certain role in improving the material conditions of the working class. The British working class seized the legal right to free association and promoted the continuous growth of trade unions. Strikes had a direct effect. Engels pointed out, "The active protests of the British people were effective. These protests limited the moneylust of the bourgeoisie within certain bounds [18]."

Secondly, trade unions were the starting point for the organized resistance of the British working class against capitalist private ownership. "The significance of trade unions and their role in organizing strikes lies in the fact that this was the first attempt by workers to eliminate competition among themselves. The arbitrariness of capitalists was based on this kind of competition [19]."

Thirdly, the strikes safeguarded the dignity of the British working class. Although most strikes ended in the failure of the workers, the British working class used the strikes to declare that they were human beings, not machines or livestock of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, they had to oppose the reduction of wages and the necessity of such a reduction itself, refuse to accept the submission to capitalist private ownership and the demand for changing capitalist private ownership, and refuse to accept the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit workers and let them starve to death.

4.1.3. Violent Resistance: The Initial Exploration of Political Struggle

The failure of the strike struggle forced the British workers' movement to continue its progress. British workers began to realize that only by completely eliminating competition under capitalist private ownership and transforming it into a person with will, rather than a commodity that the bourgeoisie could buy and sell, could the wage laws of national economics be completely ended. If the workers stopped advancing, they would still be dominated by competition and affected by commercial crises caused by the competition among the propertied classes. As trade unions intensified the hatred and anger of the workers towards the propertied classes, the British working class began to use violent resistance to oppose capitalist private ownership.

First, the working class in Britain expressed their resistance to capitalist private ownership through the most intense means, such as assassinating the bourgeoisie, eliminating the traitors, and destroying the factories. The workers' intense hatred towards their employers fully demonstrated the intensity of the social conflict under capitalist private ownership. The working class caused heavy losses to the bourgeoisie through various intense methods, marking the continuous approach of the decisive battle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Second, the British working class did not confine itself to overthrowing the bourgeois government through political revolution, but instead delved deeply into social revolution to thoroughly overthrow capitalist private property. Engels highly praised this profound understanding of the British working class: "The English, on the other hand, consider politics

to exist only for the interests of bourgeois society; they fight not against the government but directly against the bourgeoisie [20]."

Engels emphasized, "When there was a clear social goal, the British workers had repeatedly demonstrated their courage [21]." For instance, "Due to the stagnation of industry and commerce and the resulting poverty, an uprising demanding the establishment of a republic broke out in Lyon in 1834, and a general strike demanding the formulation of a people's charter and higher wages broke out in Manchester in 1842 [22]." The violent resistance of the British working class fully demonstrated that the British working class had fully realized that the only way out was to completely destroy the capitalist private ownership system.

4.1.4. Charter Movement: The First Revolutionary Movement of the Proletariat

Lenin highly praised the British workers' movement, stating that it "brilliantly foreshadowed many elements of future Marxist thought". He also highly commended the Chartism movement as "the world's first extensive, truly mass-based, and political proletarian revolutionary movement" [23]. Engels described the Chartists as "the first modern workers' party" [24].

The Chartist Movement marked the beginning of the emergence of the British working class as a unified, conscious and cohesive class, capable of becoming an independent political force with a clear political program. The People's Charter embodied the demands of the British working class for the transformation of capitalist private ownership, stating that "political power is our means, and social well-being is our goal" [25].

4.2. The revolutionary potential of the Charter Movement

First, the Chartist movement marked the point at which the British working class thoroughly became a revolutionary class. Engels pointed out, "It is the whole working class that rises against the bourgeoisie under the banner of Chartism [26]." The Chartist movement thoroughly purged British socialism of its bourgeois elements, enhanced the working class's sense of class pride, and made it increasingly aware that the immense power of their unity could challenge the bourgeoisie, thereby propelling the British working class steadily forward towards socialism.

Second, the Chartism movement demonstrated that a proletarian revolution must possess a high degree of organization and discipline. Through the struggles of the mining proletariat, Engels pointed out that the mining proletariat chose peaceful strikes of unity rather than blind armed uprisings, which fully demonstrated the calmness and composure of the British working class, as well as their organization and discipline. The struggles of the mining proletariat led the vast majority of mining proletarians to become Chartists, continuously strengthening the strength of the Chartists.

4.3. Communism is bound to win

Engels emphasized that the inevitable outcome of British history was that under the capitalist private ownership system, the exploitation by the British bourgeoisie constantly aroused the anger of the British working class and continuously intensified the contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The contradictions of capitalist private ownership pushed the British workers' movement to continue advancing along the socialist direction of the Chartism movement, constantly improving its organization and discipline. As the competition under capitalist private ownership continued to intensify, British society would completely divide into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Eventually, there would be a clear opposition between the vast majority of the proletariat and a small number of millionaires. Ultimately, it would be the proletariat, which was exploited by the bourgeoisie to the point where they had nothing left to lose, that would continuously grow and become staunch communists. The inevitable result of capitalist private ownership was that the vast majority of the poor would completely overthrow the rule of the minority of the rich, thereby completely destroying

capitalist private ownership and ultimately achieving the task of establishing a new communist society and completing the liberation of the proletariat.

5. Conclusion

In "The Condition of the Working Class in England", Engels comprehensively and systematically expounded the revolutionary ideas of the proletariat. Not only did he, based on his own observations and reliable materials, comprehensively examine the social conditions of Britain and present the real reasons for the proletarian revolution, but also, through an in-depth analysis of capitalist private ownership, he profoundly exposed the fundamental reasons for the proletarian revolution. Engels asserted that the British workers' movement reflected the historical process and trend of the British proletarian revolution, which was leading towards communism.

"The Condition of the Working Class in England" reflects Engels' profound concern for the suffering of the working class and his high-level attention to social issues. Engels based himself on the actual problems of British society, criticized the practical drawbacks and disastrous consequences of capitalist private ownership, and contemplated the communist path that transcends capitalist private ownership and realizes human liberation. This demonstrates Engels' deep humanistic concern and historical sense of mission. Engels' revolutionary ideas of the working class still have significant theoretical guiding significance and profound practical influence for the liberation of the working class worldwide in the present era.

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