

# ENGELS ON 'AUTHORITY'

Ranganayakamma

In 1978, Charles Bettelheim, a French Marxist economist, made “a first effort at systematic reflection on the political changes which have taken place in China since October 1976 and conditions which prepared the way for them”. When I wanted to bring out the Telugu translation of his essay “China Since Mao” in 1983, I found it necessary to add some footnotes so as to enable the Telugu readers who might not be familiar with certain concepts and contexts present in the original. Thus I added 137 footnotes (both short and long) preceded by a preface and followed by a post-script. One such longer footnote (No. 29) is on Engels’ article ‘On Authority’ which Bettelheim mentioned in a section titled ‘Factory despotism’. It is relevant to reproduce here few paras from that section.

*“What we are watching is, in fact, a massive counter offensive aimed at sweeping away everything that was said and done against the existence of oppressive regulations in the factories (what were called “unreasonable regulations”).”*

*“It is now declared that these regulations (which it is indeed recognized, though only in passing, are determined by production relations) “reflect the objective laws governing the complex processes of modern large-scale production”. The working class must therefore accept these regulations, since they reflect “objective laws”. And Engels is brought in for support, by quoting a formulation which he put forward in a polemic against anarchism. In his work, written in 1873 and entitled ‘On Authority’, Engels wrote; “If man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him by subjecting him, insofar as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of the social organization. Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel.”*

*“As Harry Braverman rightly points out, where Engels speaks of a “despotism independent of all social organization” and uses the concept of “authority” in a suprahistorical way allows himself to be carried away by his polemic. He thus loses sight of everything Marx wrote about the socially determined character of factory despotism. The use being made of this passage from Engels shows that what is being carried on China today is, precisely, the strengthening of despotism in the factory—in the name of transhistorical laws.”* [p.45, *China Since Mao*, Monthly Review Press, 1978.]

In response to these remarks, I wrote the following article by way of a footnote appended at the end of the Telugu translation. [Before the publication of the Telugu translation, I sent it to Bettelheim whose very brief response may be found at the end of this article.]

## WHAT DID ENGELS SAY ON AUTHORITY?

Engels wrote an article “On Authority” in 1873 (pp: 376-379, Selected Works, Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1973), criticizing the concept of authority held by Bakuninists. Engels discussed in this article the concept of authority with special reference to production relations.

Authority, in the context of production enterprises, involves imposing of an order on every person against his individual will and freedom. Needless to mention as to how this 'authority' has been exercised on the workers in the history till the present day bourgeois society. The present discussion is with regard to the nature of this authority in a future socialist society.

We have to bear in mind a socialist society, which is revolutionary in its character. Let us suppose that the working classes have overthrown the rule of the bourgeoisie, that they confiscated the means of production and started their rule. Would 'authority' disappear in production enterprises since then? Would it change? If it changes how would it change?—these are some of the questions which Engels discussed.

Let us consider some of the observations that Engels made in his article.

*“A number of Socialists have latterly launched a regular crusade against what they call the principle of authority.”*

*“Authority, in the sense in which the word is used here, means: the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination. Now, since these two words sound bad and the relationship which they represent is disagreeable to the subordinated party, the question is to ascertain whether there is any way of dispensing with it, whether—given the conditions of present-day society—we could not create another social system, in which this authority would be given no scope any longer and would consequently have to disappear.”*

*“On examining the economic, industrial and agricultural conditions which form the basis of present-day bourgeois society, we find that they tend more and more to replace isolated action by combined action of individuals. Modern industry with its big factories and mills, where hundreds of workers supervise complicated machines driven by steam, has superseded the small workshops of the separate producers...”*

*“Everywhere combined action, the complication of processes dependent upon each other, displaces independent action by individuals. But whoever mentions combined action speaks of organization; now, is it possible to have organization without authority?”*

*“Let us take by way of example a cotton spinning mill. The cotton must pass through at least six successive operations, before it is reduced to the state of thread and these operations take place for the most part in different rooms. Furthermore, keeping the machines going requires an engineer to look after the steam engine, mechanics to make the current repairs, and many other laborers whose business it is to transfer the products from one room to another and so forth. All these workers, men, women and children, are obliged to begin and finish their work at the hours fixed by the authority of the stream, which cares nothing for individual autonomy. The workers must, therefore, first come to an understanding on the hours of work; and these hours, once they are fixed, must be observed by all, without any exception. Thereafter particular questions arise in each room and at every moment concerning the mode of production, distribution of materials, etc., which must be settled at once on pain of seeing all production immediately stopped; whether they are settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a*

*majority vote, the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way.”*

*“If a man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him by subjecting him, in so far as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of all social organization. Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel.”*

*“Let us take another example—the railway. Here too the cooperation of an infinite number of individuals is absolutely necessary, and this co-operation must be practiced during precisely fixed hours so that no accidents may happen. Here, too, the first condition of the job is a dominant will that settles all subordinate questions, whether this will is represented by a single delegate or a committee charged with the execution of the resolutions of the majority of persons interested. In either case there is very pronounced authority.”*

*“When I submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians the only answer they were able to give me was the following: Yes, that’s true, but here it is not a case of authority which we confer on our delegates, but of a commission entrusted! These gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves.”*

[Whether one calls it ‘authority’ or ‘a commission entrusted’, both mean the same. It is simply change of names but the actual essence is the same. Here Engels’ argument is whether it is a committee or a single delegate, rest of the people ought to be subordinate to the authority.]

*“We have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and, on the other hand, a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organization, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate.”*

*“Hence it is absurd to speak of the principle of autonomy as being absolutely good. Authority and autonomy are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of the development of society.”*

*“If the autonomists confined themselves to saying that **the social organization of the future would restrict authority solely to the limit within which the conditions of production renders it inevitable**, we could understand each other; but they are blind to all facts that make the thing necessary and they passionately fight the word.” [emphasis added]*

These are the important observations which Engels made on the question of authority. While these observations are so clear, if some one arrives at the conclusion that Engels was wrong in his understanding of the question of authority, we are compelled to say that his critics have not properly understood him. [We are aware of the criticism of Engels by some Marxists as well Anarchists on this issue. However, we are confined here only to Bettelheim’s comment.]

Following Harry Braverman, an American Marxist, Bettelheim criticized Engels for using the concept of authority in a “*suprahistorical way*” and losing sight of everything Marx wrote about the “*socially determined character of factory despotism*”. Bettelheim further mentions Marx’s observations on factory ‘discipline’ implying that Engels did not understand Marx properly. What is that

'discipline' about which Marx wrote? It is about bourgeois discipline in the factory. Did Engels argue in favour of bourgeois discipline? Did he insist such an authority whereby the bourgeoisie imposes unreasonable rules in order to dominate and extract more work from the workers?

When Marx said that *this* (bourgeois) *discipline becomes superfluous* in a socialist society (*in which the labourers work for their own account*), does it mean that even 'socialist discipline' is not necessary? Wherever a bourgeois practice is eliminated, a socialist practice ought to be followed. Socialist morality in the place of bourgeois morality, socialist justice in the place of bourgeois justice, socialist discipline in the place of bourgeois discipline and socialist relations in the place of bourgeois relations. Similarly, socialist authority in the place of bourgeois authority. What all Engels said is about socialist authority.

If the term 'authority' has a negative connotation, one can call it 'superintendence' or 'duty of implementing discipline' or any other term conveying the relevant meaning. Although Engels used an old term but he has not used it with the old meaning. The authority which Engels talked about is not meant to oppress or suppress those who participate in the labour process. Production activities under socialism take place by means of large-scale machinery based on forces of nature and collective actions of the producers. [Needless to mention that Marx and Engels were aware of the fact that the Capitalist Mode of Production destroys not only Nature but also the Labourer.] Based on these two aspects of production, certain rules and regulations would be necessary at a given place of production. In order to make sure that all the persons who participate in the process of production follow such relevant rules, the socialist authority would be necessary. It is not simply a particular section of people who ought to be subordinate to such an authority but all those who participate in the production. It is not the hostile classes that exercise this 'authority'. Those who participate in production discuss collectively about the level and nature of exercising authority depending on the circumstances and delegate it to an individual or a committee [e.g. Workers' Management Teams as depicted in Bettelheim's book '*Cultural Revolution and Industrial Organisation in China*']. However, either the individual or the committee would not participate in the exercise of authority forever. If it is so, the same individual or the same committee would always exercise authority and rest of the people would have to be subordinate to it. Therefore all the producers would get an opportunity to exercise authority by rotation. If an individual or a committee goes wrong, others would have the right to rectify, recall or to remove if necessary.

(All this happens only when the socialist society is along a right path. We have started with the assumption that we should bear in mind a proper socialist society, haven't we?)

If there is no organ that exercises authority over a given collective action, that action would lose its collective character. This is how it happens: spinning of cotton takes place in six sections and each one of them would have its authority. Yet in order to prevent any possible contradictions among all the sections, there ought to be an organ of authority that would monitor those sections to achieve the common objective (of production). Otherwise, those sections would function in isolation separated from each other without being subordinated to a common

authority or superintendence. Hence, there ought to be an organ. It follows that the socialist authority exists due to very natural reason. Thus Engels argues that it would not be possible to organize production without exercising such a natural authority. We can improve further and further the character of the two aspects, namely, 'exercising authority' and "subordinating to authority'. But we cannot dispense with them. This authority is not similar to domination. This subordination is not similar to subservience. When people surrender to the bourgeois authority, they feel oppressed, whereas subordination here (in socialist society) is not similar to that. When they realize that it is necessary for the process of production, that it is their responsibility and subordination here is similar to subordination to the rules of the game, it would become a natural duty.

*"...a certain authority...a certain subordination are things which, independent of all social organization, are imposed upon us..."* This statement implies that authority and subordination are inevitable in any society. But this does not mean that these phenomena/practices exist with the same character and to the same extent in every society. The exercise of authority assumes the form of domination over the labourers till the bourgeois society. In socialist society it would be like performing the supervisory tasks. It undergoes a great deal of qualitative change in its character. Similarly, the aspect of 'subordination'.

In socialist society, the character of these two aspects would change but they do not cease to exist. If we hold the view that these aspects exist in any kind of society they are 'independent of all social organization'.

When Engels said, *"Authority and autonomy are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of the development of society"*, he meant that the two aspects undergo a change in various phases and he did not mean that they always remain as they existed in bourgeois society. If we understand these words properly, it will be clear that as the society progresses in a right direction, elements of 'authority' would decrease and the element of autonomy would increase. [Recall what Engels acknowledged, *"If the autonomists confined themselves to saying that **the social organization of the future would restrict authority solely to the limit within which the conditions of production renders it inevitable**, we could understand each other."*] However much the element of authority may decrease, it would not decrease to the extent of its total disappearance. (There would not be a situation where exercise of authority becomes superfluous unless we abandon the very process of production.) Similarly however much the element of autonomy of the producers increases, it would not extend to the extent that the producers need not subordinate to the minimal discipline necessary to carry on a collective action. To say that total autonomy of the producers is never possible means that there would be authority over him, even though to a minimum extent. It acquires socialist character in socialist society and communist character in communist society.

If we understand these aspects concerning authority, it would be clear that authority over the producers would exist to some extent (either more or less) depending on the level of socialist society (in terms of its use of forces of nature and the consciousness of the producers). Needless to mention again that the character of that authority would be socialist.

When Engels said that the forces of nature would subject man to a veritable despotism independent of all social organization, he refers to the despotism of the nature. Hence, there is nothing wrong to use the expression “despotism independent of all social organization”. Forces of nature do not make a distinction between capitalists and communists. Everyone ought to behave in accordance with laws of nature. To what extent do we subordinate ourselves? To the extent we use those forces of nature. In all the aspects of Nature which we make use of. It follows that as we learn to make use of forces of nature to a greater extent than before, the scope of the spheres of activities that require supervision would increase further. If human beings do not interfere with the forces of nature, the question of subordination to the laws of nature and definite supervision over processes of production would not arise. If we think that exercise of authority is not desirable while using forces of nature on a large scale, it amounts to abandoning large-scale industry. If we cannot organize large-scale industry, we have to go back into the past. From the powerloom to handloom or spinning wheel. (The degree of discipline of the producers and the degree of supervision over the process of production that were necessary during the days of powerlooms are not necessary during the days of hand-loom or spinning wheel.) If we reject ‘socialist authority’ based on the argument that authority should not exist, then we would go backwards and not forward.

[The expression that the forces of nature would “avenge” upon human beings is metaphorical. There is nothing to “avenge”. It is like saying that forces of nature subdue human beings since they (the human beings) subdued the forces of nature.]

Referring to Engels’ article on authority, Bettelheim argued that Engels was wrong in his understanding (*he was carried away by the polemic*) and hence the Chinese revisionists were making use of Engels to defend their factory despotism. If we understand Engels’ views properly, we would criticize the Chinese revisionists instead of Engels. The Chinese revisionists’ argument proceeded as follows: The rules and regulations in the processes of production “*reflect the objective laws governing the complex processes of modern large-scale production.*” If we look at these words in isolation, they sound correct. But do the factories in China follow such rules? Are there such rules which reflect the physical laws of large-scale industry? Aren’t there any elements reflecting bourgeois domination? They said, “*Rules and Regulations ought never to be eliminated*”. True, it is not possible to eliminate rules and regulations. But what sort of rules and regulations that ought not to be eliminated? Those rules and regulations whose elimination would result in stopping of machinery. Only such kind of rules ought to be retained. Are all the rules practiced in production enterprises in China of this kind? Does the machine stop if a worker goes to toilet without the permission of the supervisor? Does the machine stop if the worker delegates his duty to another worker? Does the machine stop if wages of the workers are not cut? Does the machine stop if they don’t take the attendance of the workers? While implementing bourgeois rules and regulations, the Chinese Revisionists were pretending as if they were following socialist rules that are essential for large-scale industry. More-over, they were making use of Engels by

distorting him as if he too insisted on rules and regulations which they were referring.

In Bettelheim's book 'China Since Mao', we can see how the Chinese revisionists changed all the rules and regulations of work. The statement of revisionists sometimes sound correct. Seeing those statements, we should not think that they are correct. The correctness is confined to their 'words' only. (That is why, it is not important what a person says. What he does is important.)

When I wrote to Bettelheim a detailed letter pointing out the correctness of Engels' views, he wrote back to me very briefly as follows: "You are right and I was wrong as Harry Braverman did." [Letter dated August 1983]. □□□

*[Translation from Telugu : B R Bapuji]*