

Ceremony: The journey of a statue of Friedrich Engels from Ukraine to Manchester

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Finally, 171 years after his death, revolutionary socialist Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) is being honoured in the UK city of Manchester.

The city, whose poverty he so graphically exposed in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), was Engels' home for over 20 years.

Over 600 people crowded into the Bridgewater Hall car park to celebrate the unveiling of a statue of Engels, which had been brought by truck across Europe from Ukraine, by artist and filmmaker Phil Collins as a tribute to the co-founder, with Karl Marx, of scientific socialism.

The inauguration last month was the culmination of the Manchester International Festival—watched on a live projection linked to nearby Tony Wilson Place outside HOME (the centre for contemporary film and theatre), the new home of Engels' statue.

The statue was first erected in 1970, one of many created during the Soviet era and later discarded after 1991. Though hewn out of concrete, it manages to capture something of the dignified figure of the lifelong comrade and friend of Karl Marx. Its base bears the marks of vandalism, daubed as it is with the yellow and blue colours of the Ukrainian national flag.

Collins' project is a healthy departure from the usual navel-gazing contributions served up by many contemporary artists, that conveys their own pessimism rather than the world about them—a world which is undergoing enormous shifts impacting on the lives and thinking of millions. The artist argues that “the whole of the 20th Century has been in a dialogue with Engels and Marx.”

Shortlisted for the Turner prize in 2006, Berlin-based artist Collins has also made two films released in 2010, called “Marxism Today” and “Use! Value! Exchange.”

The film section of *Ceremony* was introduced by Manchester-born actress Maxine Peake. She posed the following rhetorical question—“How much has changed

compared to Victorian times?” when Engels wrote his seminal work exposing the splendid lives of the rich, side by side with the unimaginable squalor that was the lot of working class families in the major cities of England.

The film shows the deprivation that blights the lives of so many today. Fly-on-the-wall footage of working class life in Manchester is interspersed with the story of the statue's travels through Europe, as well as live interviews with people from the audience—picked at random to join in with activities in Tony Wilson Place around the statue.

The journey begins in the Ukraine, “a graveyard of statues,” in the small village of Mala Pereshchepina. This is where Collins found the Engels he was looking for, lying face down, cut in two and wrapped in polythene. Local school children sing a farewell melody and wave as the statue departs on its open-top truck.

On its way through Eastern Europe, many of the images are bleak.

Passing through Engels' birthplace of Barmen (now Wuppertal) in Germany, the welcome is warm.

Collins told the *Guardian*, “Engels was not responsible for the atrocities committed by Stalinism.”

This assessment contrasts with a vicious piece in the same newspaper headlined “Manchester has a Soviet Statue of Engels—Shame no one asked the city's Ukrainians.” The article said erecting a statue of Engels would be like tolerating “the presence of Nazi propaganda in Manchester”—a monstrous lie based on the conflation of Stalinism with Marxism.

When the statue arrives in Manchester, Engels is greeted as “a local hero.” “No one can take him away,” says Collins. A monument in his honour “acknowledges Manchester's radical past in Chartism [the radical workers' movement of the 1830s and 1840s].”

Passing through the city, which has seen much regeneration and handsome profits for property developers, the filmmaker shoots from the moving truck.

It is as though we are looking through the statue's eyes—at the homeless huddled in doorways, the unemployed struggling to make ends meet, the locals featured in the film. Life is still the “Hell upon Earth” Engels described so many years ago, if you are poor.

The statue stands a few streets away from the former Little Ireland district of the city that Engels described as “horrid little slum.” He continued, “The race that lives in these ruinous cottages, behind broken windows, mended with oilskin, sprung doors, and rotten doorposts, or in dark, wet cellars, in measureless filth and stench, in this atmosphere penned in as if with a purpose, this race must really have reached the lowest stage of humanity.” [*The Condition of the Working Class in England*].

Ceremony includes an interview with a woman from Lifeshare—a charity recently based in Dantzic Street's old Mission Street school in Angel Meadow. Every weekend for the past 25 years, Lifeshare has provided breakfast for up to 125 homeless people, as well as other meals. They have been evicted recently from their premises, in a deal between the Labour Party-run Manchester City Council and international property developer, Far East Consortium, to make way for a £200 million luxury residential development of 754 homes.

In Engels' time Angel Meadow was known as Irish Town, whose “houses were never repaired, filthy, with damp, unclean cellar dwellings; the lanes are neither paved nor supplied with sewers.” [Engels, *ibid*]

As of writing the council have offered Lifeshare no alternative accommodation--the homeless are banished from Angel Meadow.

Interviewed live from Tony Wilson Place, a resident of the Whalley Range district of the city said she learned nothing about Engels in school history lessons, “just kings and queens, not [about] the working class. Engels was about changing conditions.”

She is right. Engels did not just expose the horrors of capitalism, but worked for its downfall. For him and Marx, the working class was not just an oppressed class but a revolutionary force. In the *Communist Manifesto* they wrote the following famous words: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

In the evening following *Ceremony*, slogans appeared on a digital wall backdrop behind the statue—including “Nothing to lose but our chains,” paraphrasing the famous call to arms of the *Communist Manifesto*. A placard placed at its base read, “End modern day slavery,” and

another, “Willkommen in Manchester Friedrich! ” Someone placed on the plinth a quote from Engels that resonates today: “The way in which the vast mass of the poor are treated by modern society is truly scandalous.”

The film shows school children reciting extracts from *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. At the end of *Ceremony* they movingly laid armfuls of lilies at the foot of the statue.

After the film showing, members of the Socialist Equality Party handed out leaflets about the Grenfell fire, containing a passage from Engels on the social murder of the working class under capitalism. A couple from eastern Germany told us they were disappointed with *Ceremony*. They described it as “Disneyland for Marxists, it doesn't tell you anything.”

It is true that the film and the event had their weaknesses. In this reviewer's opinion, there was just too much gratuitous swearing, beer swilling and cigarette smoking in Collins' film—lending a patronising tone to the depiction of the working class.

But despite the shortcomings of *Ceremony* and whatever the artistic qualities of the work in question, there is a genuine and positive significance to the placement of a statue of Engels in Manchester. In this centenary year of the Russian Revolution, Collins was moved to do so in large part to reclaim him from an association with the monstrous tyranny of Stalinism and give him back to the working class. And it must be said that the statue has met with popular expressions of respect and affection.

There it stands, in prime location, not just a reminder of a radical past, but a starting point for discussion about the burning issues of the day—poverty, inequality and war.



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