

# Engels' Critical Thought on Space and Its Contemporary Value — Perspectives Based on *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*

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**Abstract:** Engels's publication, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (referred to as *The Condition*), is a significant exploration of his new worldview, containing rich and profound spatial critique. It holds an important position in the history of Marxist development. Throughout the writing process of this work, Engels referred to a large amount of data and had conversations with the workers. He elucidated the issues of capital accumulation and expansion from the dimensions of regional and global expansion of capitalism. He explored the changes in capitalist cities and rural areas from the dimensions of the urban-rural divide and urban expansion. He revealed the impact of rapid capitalist development on the working class from the dimension of the deterioration of the working class's production and living spaces. The analysis of these three dimensions collectively constitutes a critique of capitalism and has profound implications for spatial critique. Engels' research fully focuses on spatial entities such as cities, factories, and residences, integrating his thoughts on productive forces and relations into these spatial forms. He made significant contributions to the formation of a historical materialist spatial perspective, and his work profoundly reveals the spatial living conditions of the British working class, which is conducive to awakening the working class and has important significance for spatial research methodology.

**Keywords:** Engels, Spatial Critical Thought, Historical Materialism

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## 1. Introduction

*The Condition* is an important theoretical work in the history of the development of Marxism. In this work, Engels pioneered the use of field observation and documentary research methods to show the world the current situation of the British working class under the Industrial Revolution, and revealed the social roots behind the current situation, which is a work full of the germ of the idea of historical materialism. Currently in China, research on this work has achieved certain results. Scholars have analyzed its urban-rural perspective [1], explained its contemporary value [2] and theoretical contribution [3], and examined its urban thinking [4], investigation and research thinking [5, 6], and ecological civilization thinking [7, 8]. However, research on its spatial critique is somewhat lacking. This article will attempt to comb through the content of this work, delve into its spatial critique, and analyze its contemporary significance.

## 2. The Historical Context of *The Condition* and the Precipitation of Space

Engels's early experiences and thoughts, together with the development of capitalism in 19th century England, gave birth to the great work *The Condition*. at the age of 19, he anonymously published *Letters from the Wupper Valley*, which exposed the dark side of social life in that era. In the article, Engels pointed out that underneath the glamorous exterior of the Wupper Valley, there were in fact two groups of people whose existence was vastly different. On the one hand, the workers' group "labored in low houses, inhaling more soot and dust than oxygen, and most of them had been living in such conditions since the age of six, which deprived them of all energy and enjoyment of life." [9] On the other

hand, the group of factory owners lived among the high buildings and enjoyed a beautiful living environment. On the basis of in-depth observation and analysis, Engels found the religious factor behind this imbalance, pointing out that pietism was the spiritual pillar to maintain the factory system, which could paralyze the thinking of the workers' groups. However, due to the ideological limitations of this period, he did not further elevate his dissatisfaction and criticism of the factory system to a critique of the bourgeoisie and capitalism. In 1842, after completing his military service, Engels came to Manchester, England, to work in factory management. At that time, England was undergoing an industrial revolution, capitalism was expanding at a rapid pace, and various factories and enterprises were spreading all over the city. It was on this basis that Engels had the opportunity to observe the production and living conditions of the workers. As one of the founders of Marxism, he attached great importance to the examination of social conditions in his theoretical research. During his stay in England, he wrote a series of articles through his analysis of capitalism and his investigation of the condition of the working class. It was also at this stage that Engels' political stance and worldview shifted, i.e. from revolutionary democracy to communism and materialism.

In order to conduct a more systematic study of British social history, Engels utilized more than a year of extensive fieldwork to fully understand the productive living conditions of British workers in that era. As he wrote in the preface to *The Condition*: "The problem explored in this book was at first intended by me to be treated merely as a chapter in a more extensive work on the social history of England. But the importance of the problem soon compelled me to make a separate study of it." [10] The separate study to which he refers is precisely the study of analyzing the condition of the British working class. And why he chose the British working class for analysis, Engels likewise elaborated: "The condition of the working class is the true basis and point of departure of all contemporary social movements, for it is the most acute and revealing manifestation of the social catastrophe that exists for us at present..... On the one hand, it gives socialist theories, on the other hand, it gives socialist theories to those who think that socialism is the best way of doing things. theory, on the one hand, and on the other, a solid basis for the opinions of those who believe that socialist theory has a right to exist..... It is only in England that the necessary material can be gathered in such completeness and confirmed by official investigation" [10]. It can be said that the strong concern for reality led Engels to investigate and study the condition of the working class in England, and it was such investigation and study that laid a solid objective foundation for the theory of scientific socialism.

Time and space are both the modes of existence of material movement in nature and the preconditions for the survival and development of human society. An analysis of Engels' work reveals that Engels seems to have focused his research primarily on the process of capitalism's birth, development, and demise, such that the historical process

unfolds "according to the sequence of time, not space or place." [11] This, therefore, has led later researchers to the misconception that Engels was out of touch with the spatial question. But in fact, in *The Condition*, Engels shows a special concern for the problem of space. His discourse and analysis of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in England dealt directly with the important space of the city. The rise and expansion of capitalism has contributed to the rise and development of urban space, and the layers of exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie have likewise taken place in urban space. In other words, space is not only a container for productive practices, but also implies processes of production and reproduction of social relations. Therefore, in critiquing capitalism and the bourgeoisie, it is inevitable to apply the perspective of spatial analysis. In other words, Engels was not aphasic and absent on the issue of space, but rather had a very penetrating insight.

### 3. Three Dimensions of Spatial Critique in *The Condition*

In *The Condition*, Engels's spatial critique unfolds in three main dimensions, namely, the macro-dimension, the meso-dimension, and the micro-dimension. In the macro dimension, he analyzes the expansion of capitalism between cities and even between countries, in the meso dimension, he elaborates on the urban-rural relations of capitalism, and in the micro dimension, he focuses on the production and living conditions of workers in the cities.

#### 3.1. Macro Dimension: Regional and Global Expansion of Capitalism

David ■ Harvey has written in *Spaces of Hope*: "Capital accumulation has always been a profoundly geographical event. Capitalism would not have been able to function as a politico-economic system long ago without the multiple possibilities for geographic expansion, spatial reorganization, and uneven geographic development inherent in it." [12] The expansion of space originated from the accumulation of capital, which was attributed to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution, which took place in England in the second half of the 18th century, provided a great impetus to industrial production. On the one hand, the invention and improvement of production tools, such as spinning machines, greatly increased the efficiency of production, which enabled the workers to produce more products in a shorter period of time at a lower cost. On the other hand, with the use of machinery, such as the steam engine, the factory was equipped with the most powerful and efficient machines, such as the steam engine. On the other hand, with the use of steam engines and other machinery, the problem of power in factories was also well solved, which made "machine labor prevailed over manual labor in all the major branches of British industry" [10]. The improvement of machines and the upgrading of power laid the foundation for the production of products, within a certain period of time, a large number of cheap

commodities will quickly occupy the market space in the region, after a period of time of selling, the capital will be gathered in the hands of the factory owners, for them to expand the reproduction and open up new market space ready.

The accumulation of capital requires a large number of markets as a prerequisite, but the consumption capacity of a city or region at a certain time is always limited, so the factory owners have to constantly broaden the market space. And it was the use of steam engines and other tools that drove the construction of transportation in Britain. The highway, canal and railroad all over the country broke the original spatial barriers between cities and regions, and narrowed the distance between them, which provided the conditions for the flow of commodities. Of course, the development of water transportation also makes the distance between countries closer, the factory owner's commodity dumping also has a broader market, "all the foreign markets without the implementation of the protection of tariffs almost all occupied" [10], the world's decentralized state is broken, backward countries are involved in the capitalist production system and production space.

### **3.2. Meso-Dimension: The Expanding Capitalist City**

If, in the macro dimension, the development of capitalism has broken up the original state of dispersion around the world, providing a wide space for the sale of goods and the accumulation of capital, then, in the meso dimension, the development of capitalism has led to the increasing size of the cities and the bankruptcy of part of the rural population.

As a basic form of human social space, the city "is a product created through the practical activities of man, the objectification of the essential power of man, and a humanized space." [13] The countryside, on the other hand, is a spatial form that corresponds to the city, and is usually interpreted as a place where agriculture is predominantly practiced and where the population distribution is more dispersed than in towns and cities. Before a large number of machines and equipment were put into use, farmers and craftsmen living in the countryside or in the suburbs practiced farming and production in the traditional way, "the wife and daughters spun the yarn, the husband wove it into cloth, and if the family in charge didn't process it themselves, they sold the yarn." [10] They use their own hands for labor, earn some money by selling the products of their labor, and are able to live well. They live in the countryside and suburbs all year round and lead a peaceful life, "They are isolated from the city and have never been in it" [10].

When the new machines and equipment that emerged in the Industrial Revolution were put into use, large-scale production became possible, which required more raw materials and plants on the one hand, and a large number of laborers on the other. The capitalist, because he had to keep expanding production, needed to employ a large number of laborers by using the capital he had already accumulated in his hands. "The very demand for machinery, fuel, and raw materials directly requires large numbers of workers and many trades to double their work." [10] And as the spreading

popularity of machines and equipment led to a great provision of efficiency in handicraft production as well as in agricultural production, in other words, by means of machines and equipment, it was possible to produce more with less manpower, and this led to unemployment and even bankruptcy for some, "machine labor triumphed over manual labor in all the principal branches of English industry, and from that time onwards the whole history of English industry is tells is only how the craftsman was expelled from one position to another by the machine." [10] In order to make ends meet, they had to move into the cities and be employed by capitalists. In order to facilitate a productive life, these hired laborers would cluster around the factories to live, and as production continued to expand, more and more laborers would flood into the cities. "Large industrial enterprises required many workers to labor together in one building; they had to live in such concentrations that a village or town would form near even a moderately sized factory." [10] These villages and towns grew and became small cities, and eventually these small cities became large cities again. The size of the cities increased further. This also gave England a cityscape unlike any other in its time: "a capital city of 2.5 million inhabitants, huge factory towns, industries which supply the world with their products, almost all of which are produced by highly sophisticated machinery, and an industrious, intelligent and dense population, two-thirds of which are engaged in industry." [10]

### **3.3. Micro Dimension: Deterioration of Productive Living Space for the Working Class**

From the micro dimension, the continuous expansion of capitalism has step by step squeezed the production and living space of workers, resulting in the deterioration of the living conditions of the working class. In *The Condition*, Engels devoted a lot of space to the description of the living conditions of the working class in Britain, and these words deeply reflected the poor living conditions of the working class at that time.

First, the deteriorating conditions of production for the working class. Engels observed a large number of factories during more than a year of fieldwork and found that these factories were generally plagued with a series of problems, such as dirty air, full of bad odors, and environmental pollution. Workers who work in this kind of environment all the year round are bound to have very great physical damage, so "it is rare to see strong, fit and healthy people among them" [10], of course, such a poor production environment will not only cause damage to the workers' body, but also to their psychology. Therefore, Engels made it clear that the working class would not feel the slightest bit of happiness in such an environment, and that it was even "impossible to think, feel and live like a human being." [10]

Secondly, the deteriorating living conditions of the working class. First, the housing conditions of the working class are very poor. Since the cities are already densely populated, those working class people with very low incomes have to squeeze into small spaces. The houses they lived in

were damp, "either a basement with water bubbling underneath or an attic with rain leaking from above." [10] Working class people living in these small spaces also had to deal with foul air and poor surroundings. What's more, they have no fixed place to live, but have to go to live in crowded nightclubs, where both men and women, old and young, healthy and sick, have to be crowded together, thus making the conditions even worse. Secondly, the diet of the working class is very poor. Because of their limited incomes and their disadvantaged position in the city, neither the quantity nor the quality of food purchased would satisfy their original requirements as laborers, and in the case of children's diets, "the workers had neither the money nor the time to get more suitable food for their children." [10] Thirdly, the health of the working class was very poor. The poor housing conditions as well as the dietary conditions posed a huge threat to the health of the working class. Due to the long period of time in the humid, turbid air and poor sanitary conditions, together with their diet, they will get many diseases, and even some of them will be passed on to the next generation.

Finally, capitalism's constant squeeze on workers' productive life space also leads to their decadence and degeneration. Labor itself is a pleasurable thing, but in capitalist society, due to the exploitation of capitalists, labor is transformed from a spontaneous act into a compulsory activity, which creates an alienating situation: "The more the worker feels himself to be a human being, the more he hates his work, because he feels that it is forced upon him, and that it is purposeless to himself. of it." [10] Being forced to do large amounts of simple, repetitive work for long periods of time robs the working class of all disposable time for more mental activity, and ultimately ties them completely to the gears of industry.

#### **4. The Important Contribution of the Spatial Critique of *The Condition* to Historical Materialism**

*The Condition*, as Engels' exploration of a new worldview, is rich in theoretical contributions. The significant results of his field research, which went deep into the environment in which the British working class lived, not only contributed to the formation of the historical materialist view of space and profoundly revealed the spatial existence of the British working class, but also his research methodology provides us with a very positive guidance for conducting spatial research.

##### **4.1. The Research and Analysis in the State of the Art Made a Significant Contribution to the Formation of the Historical Materialist View of Space**

Engels sympathized with the working class and obtained first-hand information through extensive fieldwork. However, he did not simply stop at the level of describing the phenomenon of the condition of the working class in Britain, but carried out an in-depth analysis and study of such a

condition, the results of which contributed significantly to the formation of the spatial view of historical materialism.

In the book *The Condition*, there is an embryonic idea that the productive forces determine the relations of production. And whether it is the productive forces or the relations of production, they always require a certain space as a carrier." The social relations of production have a certain social existence only insofar as they have a certain spatial existence; i.e., the social relations of production project themselves onto a certain space, and as they produce space they engrave themselves in it." [14] Thus, when discussing productive forces and relations of production, it is important to examine them in relation to the important vehicle of space. As early as in the essay *The Eighteenth Century*, Engels pointed out that "this revolutionization of English industry is the basis of all kinds of relations in modern England, the motive force of the movement of the whole society." [10] That is to say, the British Industrial Revolution was not only a revolution in production technology, but also a profound change in social relations. In *The Condition*, he elaborated this viewpoint even further. In the book, he describes the difference between the production and living conditions of workers before and after the invention and use of machines, and through the comparison of such differences, reflects a situation that the innovation of production tools has promoted the great improvement of production efficiency, and therefore enables the rapid accumulation of capital in a certain space, while the innovation of means of transportation and the large-scale construction of transport facilities can provide the conditions for the breakthrough of the original spatial barriers of capitalism and the expansion of its own interests. conditions for capitalism to break through the original spatial barriers and expand its own interests. Of course, with the completion of the accumulation of capital in a certain space, the social relations and the production and living conditions of the people in this space will also undergo significant changes, resulting in a new look of this space as a whole.

In short, in *The Condition*, Engels paid full attention to the physical forms of space, such as cities, factories, and houses, and incorporated his thoughts on productive forces and relations of production into these spatial forms. Therefore, it can be said that Engels has realized that space is inseparable from human production activities, which has made an important contribution to the formation of the spatial view of historical materialism. After this, both Engels himself and Marx attached great importance to analyzing the activities of human society in conjunction with the dimension of space, avoiding the abstract and empty study of space, as well as avoiding placing the study of such major issues as the productive forces and relations of production in the realm of absolute abstraction.

##### **4.2. The Condition Reveals the Spatial Existence of the Working Class Through an Analysis of the Relationship Between the Two Opposing Classes**

In *The Condition*, Engels analyzes in detail the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the working class, and by doing

so deeply reveals the spatial existence of the working class.

The rapid development of capitalism has given rise to a large number of industrial workers, who have flocked to the cities in droves in order to make ends meet, crowded into small spaces. The space they enter is already permeated with the odor of capital. As Lefebvre said, "Space is not an expression of purity, but conveys the norms and values of capitalist society" [15]. Driven by pecuniary interests, the bourgeoisie carries out productive activities with only one purpose left, which is to make money. "In the view of the bourgeoisie, there is not a single thing in the world that does not exist for the sake of money, not even themselves, because they live to make money", [10] and in order to achieve this purpose, the bourgeoisie does everything. First of all, the bourgeoisie, in order to obtain more profits, does not regard the workers as human beings at all, but only as tools to carry out production, thus constantly depriving them of their material wealth and spiritual life, and squeezing the space for their activities as human beings. In his book, Engels writes about a scenario in which, when he talks to a capitalist about the deplorable conditions in the workers' living quarters, the capitalist responds simply by saying that there is a lot of money to be made here, without the slightest bit of compassion for the miserable conditions faced by the workers. Secondly, the bourgeoisie also has to oppress the poor on the basis of Malthus's demographic theory, thus completely depriving the poor of their living space. In Malthus's view, the earth would always be overpopulated, so there would always be a state of scarcity, poverty, immorality, etc. Due to the large population, these people were divided into different classes, some of which were more affluent, well-educated, and moral, while others were poor, lacked knowledge and had low moral standards. From this he came to the conclusion that charity and dole were useless and that they only gave rise to more surplus population. Such a theory was to the liking of the bourgeoisie, and so they introduced the New Law of Poverty, which sent the poor to places of learning, where conditions were even worse than in prisons, and where people were abused every day, without any privacy or dignity.

It can therefore be concluded that although the working class plays an extremely important role for the productive activities of the bourgeoisie, their status is not improved, but rather they are caught up in the urban space permeated with the logic of capital, where the bourgeoisie, in order to gain more profit, only treats the workers as tools and never cares about their lives as well as their spiritual state, resulting in the workers always being tied to the industrial As a result, workers are always tied to the gears of industry, in a state of inhumanity. Faced with the working class caught in this space of brutal exploitation and oppression, Engels said: "The workers must try to get out of this inhuman condition, and must strive for a good and more human status. They cannot do this if they do not fight against the interests of the bourgeoisie itself, which lie precisely in the exploitation of the workers." [10] So, Engels did not write *The Condition* simply to show the

current situation of the productive life of the workers in Britain, but he wanted to use such a work to make more people aware of their situation, and thus to awaken the working class in Britain, the working class in Germany, and indeed the working class all over the world.

#### **4.3. The Methodology the Condition Is of Great Significance to Space Research**

"The answer to the question has a prerequisite dependence on the research methodology and research position. Applying different methods and basing oneself on different positions will lead to different conclusions on the same question." [16] At the beginning of the book *The Condition*, Engels distinctly explains his research methods, i.e., the method of field investigation and documentary research. This is the first time that the classic Marxist writer used such a research method to analyze the spatial problem, which provides a great guiding value for later generations to conduct spatial research from a practical point of view.

Before Engels wrote this work, he keenly realized that the study of the condition of the British working class was of strong practical significance, so he started not from the idea but from the practical point of view, and spent more than a year to personally investigate the space where the British workers' production and life took place, to see the scenes of their work and life, and to hear their voices, in addition to that, Engels also consulted a large number of reliable information, so in the book *The Condition* we can see many detailed descriptions of the present situation of the British workers and various data proving these situations. In addition to this, Engels also consulted a great deal of reliable information. Therefore, in *The Condition*, we can see many detailed descriptions of the status quo of the British workers as well as a variety of data proving these status quo. Of course, Engels did not simply pile up what he saw, heard and read in the production and living space in which the English working class lived, but on the basis of presenting these phenomena, he made a profound analysis of the reasons behind them. At the beginning of *The Condition*, in the section "To the Working Class of Great Britain", he writes: "I have taken the knowledge I have gained very seriously, and have examined all the official and unofficial documents I have been able to find. I am not satisfied with this, I want more than purely abstract knowledge of my subject, I would like to see you in your homes, observe your daily life, talk to you about your condition and your sufferings, and see with my own eyes the struggle you are waging against the social and political domination of your oppressors." [10] This reveals that we should have a strong sense of problem when doing related research, only then can we correctly grasp the tone and direction of the research. At present, we are in the midst of a century of unprecedented changes, spatial imbalance, lack of spatial justice and other phenomena occur from time to time, which requires us to have a strong sense of the problem, the need to carry out in-depth research with the problem, rather than just show the appearance of these problems. In addition, in the process of research, we also

need to flexibly use various research methods, not only to learn to go deep into the grassroots to obtain direct investigation materials, to study and analyze problems from the most direct and realistic materials, but also to learn to find key clues and information from them by reviewing and analyzing relevant materials. Finally, when conducting spatial research, one must have a correct value stance. Engels was able to accurately analyze the reasons behind the spatial situation that caused the British working class to find itself in, on the one hand, thanks to his investigation and research, and on the other hand, because he was able to firmly stand on the position of the working class to consider the problem. In the same way, if we are now to carry out research on spatial issues, we must also stand firmly on the position of the people, so as to ultimately obtain theoretical and practical results in favor of the people.

## 5. Conclusion

Engels' *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* is a theoretical work filled with spatial critique. He deeply criticizes capitalism from three dimensions: the regional expansion and global extension of capitalism, the urban-rural divide and urban expansion of capitalism, and the deterioration of the production and living space of the working class. Engels' research method pays full attention to the physical form of space, incorporating the consideration of productivity and production relations, making significant contributions to the formation of a historical materialistic spatial perspective. At the same time, his work reveals the spatial living conditions of the working class, further awakening their consciousness. Therefore, Engels' spatial critique not only holds historical significance but also contemporary value.

In today's 21st century, with the deepening globalization and rapid urbanization, spatial issues are becoming increasingly prominent. The spatial critique revealed in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* still holds significant enlightening significance for our understanding of the development of contemporary capitalism and its spatial layout. We should delve into Engels' spatial critique, combine it with contemporary reality, explore new paths for spatial development, and promote social fairness, justice, and comprehensive human development. At the same time, we should also inherit and develop Engels' research methods, focus on spatial issues, and provide more theoretical support for the deepening of spatial research.

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