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A remarkable new biography from one of Britain's leading young historians that recovers the co-founder of communism from the shadows of history

Friedrich Engels is one of the most intriguing and contradictory figures of the nineteenth century. Born to a prosperous Prussian mercantile family, he spent his life working in the Manchester cotton industry, riding to the Cheshire hounds, and enjoying the comfortable upper-middle-class existence of a Victorian gentleman.

Yet Engels was also, with Karl Marx, the founder of international communism, which in the twentieth century came to govern one-third of the human race. He was the coauthor of *The Communist Manifesto*, a ruthless party tactician, and the man who sacrificed his best years so that Marx could write *Das Kapital*. His searing account of the Industrial Revolution, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, remains one of the most haunting and brutal indictments of the human costs of capitalism. Far more than Marx's indispensable aide, Engels was a profound thinker in his own right—on warfare, feminism, urbanism, Darwinism, technology, and colonialism. With fierce clarity, he predicted the social effects of today's free-market fundamentalism and unstoppable globalization.

Drawing on a wealth of letters and archives, acclaimed historian Tristram Hunt plumbs Engels's intellectual legacy and shows us how one of the great *bon viveurs* of Victorian Britain reconciled his exuberant personal life with his radical political philosophy. Set against the backdrop of revolutionary Europe and industrializing England—of Manchester mills, Paris barricades, and East End strikes—*Marx's General* tells a story of devoted friendship, class compromise, ideological struggle, and family betrayal. And it tackles head-on the question of Engels's influence: was Engels, after Marx's death, responsible for some of the most devastating turns of twentieth-century history, or was the idealism of his thought distorted by those who claimed to be his followers?

An epic history and riveting biography, *Marx's General* at last brings Engels out from the shadow of his famous friend and collaborator.

Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels Details

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Tristram Hunt

From Reader Review Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels for online ebook

Steven Peterson says

While I have read some of Engels' works and many of the Marx-Engels works and, of course, many of Marx' "solo" authored works, I had little information about Friedrich Engels the person. I did know that there was a tension between his role as a socialist thinker and his business role, making money off of the work of proletarians. Of course, the counterargument is that, as much as he was uncomfortable with this, it allowed him to financially support Marx's life work.

I found this a good biography of a major figure in politics and political thought. Whether or not one might agree with Marx and Engels, they are important figures historically. The more that we understand the context in which their work developed, the better off we are in understanding the whys and wherefores of such writing.

Many have viewed Engels as a second rate thinker. This book seems to do a nice job in debunking that. The evidence here (and elsewhere) is that he made genuine contributions to joint works with Marx (such as "The German Ideology"); he also wrote some solid works on his own; he ended up completing "Das Kapital" after Marx's death, using the latter's almost undecipherable notes and fragments for these manuscripts.

The book contributes more than summaries of Marx' and Engels' writings. We learn quite a bit about Marx--and surely a great deal about Engels. They became friends and collaborators while in Germany. They dabbled in revolutionary movements, without accomplishing a great deal by their active work on the parapets. Their family lives diverged greatly, with Marx having a brood of children, doting on them. Engels only formally married once, as his second partner lay near death. His relationship with the Burns sisters is rather nicely told--a tempestuous relationship with the elder sister and a more comfortable relationship with the younger sister, who became Engels' partner upon the death of the elder sister. Engels' relationships with Marx's children and sons-in-law add a nice, sometimes poignant, touch.

Some questions arise for me in the selection of subjects in this book. For instance, I would have thought that at least a few pages should have been devoted to "The Economic and Philosophical" manuscripts, in which Marx began playing with themes that were later elaborated (e.g., alienation).

The story of Engels' life is valuable in its own right. The tension between his business-oriented family and his own youthful radical views. He often found himself on the "outs" with his family. He was pretty wild while young, drinking a great deal and living a reasonably dissolute life. His interest in issues of politics and philosophy saw him attending lectures of major figures and reading the works of key philosophers. His relationship with a group of Young Hegelians ("die Freien") accelerated his radical thinking. It was during that time that he met Marx. Their collaboration (and friendship) began at that point.

The book does a nice job of showing how dedicated Engels was toward Marx, subordinating his own philosophical ambitions to support the work of Marx. At that, the two worked together on some major co-authored works, such as "The Communist Manifesto" and "The German Ideology" and "The Holy Family." Engels wrote a book that generated some visibility early on, "The Condition of the Working Class in England" as well as later in life, such as "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State."

He was more than just a writer and a collaborator of Marx; He was a political activist (although he and Marx

weren't always comfortable working in organizations where people would disagree with them). He played a role in socialist organizations, often in leadership positions. He wrote pamphlets and articles that advocated change.

If you are interested in learning more about Friedrich Engels as a thinker, a political actor, and as a person, this book will be useful reading.

Domhnall says

Marx and Engels are inextricable. Engels developed his own ideas independently but deferred to Marx as a far better communicator and theorist. After Marx died, Engels ensured that his works were completed, properly edited, published and promoted. It is fascinating and helpful to appreciate the separate contributions Engels did make without falling into the mistaken idea that he and Marx were in any important way divergent. They were rather each others' best critics and stimulants. But it is also not correct to try and interpret Marxism without taking Engels into account.

Much of 20th century history can be traced to the impact and evolution of Marxism and of course reactions to Marxism. Obviously later "Marxists" wanted the credibility and status that goes with their association with Marx, cited Marx and Engels in support of their own proposals and actions, argued ad nauseam about who had the true inheritance, but that does not mean we have to accept their claims of authenticity. Why for example would we be required to believe the claims of a pathological liar and psychopath like Stalin? On reflection, how could that ever make sense? One answer is of course that it suits some sources to accept Stalin's claims, for example, because that helps to discredit Marxism without proper scrutiny. It is worth discrediting Marxism because – and only because - it remains relevant to current circumstances.

Actually, many important works of Marx and Engels were not even available to read, let alone to influence anybody, until the third decade of the 20th Century, and so far as Marxism was influential this was largely through the medium of several short introductions written by Engels after Marx died. In a curious way, we are probably better placed today to appreciate what Marx and Engels really did say, and to evaluate their theories in a considered way in the light of evidence, than was possible throughout the last century.

To do this in a useful way, we need guides who are not overtly signed up to the Cold War camps of the past, either for or against. It is a task for a decent historian and on the whole Tristram Hunt has done a professional job of work here.

He certainly points out some of the howling errors in Engels' writing, not least when Engels tries to fit Science and mathematics into his dialectical methodology, and he bewails the poisonous legacy – vicious as well as plain stupid - of this strand of thought in soviet science under Stalin. [I suppose it is best compared to the impact of creationism on attitudes to science in the modern USA]. He also describes with resigned distaste the enthusiasm with which Engels engaged in sectarian infighting among revolutionaries and their allies, and suggests that a major error of judgement in Engels' dealings with English socialists probably played a significant part in preventing Marxism from becoming established there [for better or worse is another debate, but I suspect this claim is excessive since Engels himself offered better explanations for the failure of British workers to sign up to the Marxist, revolutionary agenda].

He describes the extent to which Engels was a creature of his own times, but also the way Engels learned to

challenge and radically transform some of the mistakes in his youthful thinking. A major example was in Engels' very racist references to supposedly inferior ethnic groups in his youth and his later appreciation and writing about the evils of racism and colonialism in capitalist values. A different example is the way Engels moved away from his early commitment to violent, revolutionary change, and increasingly advocated a gradualist, democratic process of social transformation, based on his long experience of witnessing failed and abortive revolutions around Europe and his realistic appreciation of the powerful resources available to the modern, reactionary state. In this and other examples, it becomes clear how important it is to place the writings of Marx and Engels in their historical context and to recognise the way their thinking changed over time, so that merely because there is a text to support one point of view, say to show their racism, this does not demonstrate that this was their final, considered judgement. [This is how ruffians can misuse scripture to perverse ends in every ideological system.]

Where Engels was right, though, his work is of lasting importance. He is appreciated by modern feminists, for example, because he analysed the position of women with reference to economic rather than biological determinism. He identified nationalism as a reactionary force that could totally undermine working class solidarity and he predicted that a major European war would destroy all prospects of socialist change for a generation. His prediction in the 1880s of what a modern war would look like turns out to be chillingly accurate and he developed a true horror for warfare, in contrast with his youthful practical engagement as well as theoretical fascination with it.

What emerges as the greatest strength in the work of Marx and Engels is not their prophecies nor their political machinations, but their thorough, systematic and evidence based critique of the way 19th Century Capitalism played out around them, and in their own time, with Engels of course offering a well informed, insider view as a practical industrialist, entrepreneur and financial speculator. It is even the one part of Marxism that really was successfully prophetic, as witnessed for example in the treatment of workers in the emerging capitalism of China and India and the impact of globalisation generally. It is because they were so perceptive in describing their own, contemporary environment – based on empirical evidence and observation, but also structured by an effective explanatory model - that their work has had such lasting value, and continues to be relevant today.

Kris McCracken says

I have a confession to make: I am an Engels Man.

Friedrich Engels used to be a name that was known throughout the world. Cities, towns and streets bore the name. Ships, railway engines and tanks. You don't see so much of that these days...

It seems to me that – with this book – Hunt is seeking to recover Engels's reputation from those who have portrayed him as responsible for Stalinist excesses and chosen him as the fall guy for the failures of Marxism. In this (at least halfway through the book), he's partly successful.

Hunt has achieved much in constructing with some flair the intellectual, cultural and economic milieu that helped form Engels the man – businessman, armed revolutionary, philosopher, and pants man. The years surrounding preceding and following the tumultuous events of 1848 are full of the kinds of tales to keep a good biography ticking over (despite the necessary deviations into political philosophy).

Money, spies, revolution, bullets whizzing past, busy wenches, tempting maids, theories of surplus; so far

this book has it all. It's well worth a look, particularly if you'd like to bone up on your socio-economic history.

I loved it.

Brenda says

Really, really well done. It is a challenge to reconstruct the atmosphere of mid nineteenth century England in which Engels and Marx thought and wrote. It is easy to describe events, but challenging to show us why their brilliant socialist tracts had such traction. Economic disparity alone can't explain it. I am rooting for the revival of socialist thought as we face the dire economics in America in 2009.

Hana says

Personal Ads: Recovering Wall Street executive Googling *Dialectical Materialism* Hoping to find fellow travelers with well-disguised ISPNs

Kenghis Khan says

Hunt's tale begins, appropriately enough, with a subtle comparison of the mostly forgotten and stripmall-blighted city of Engels (formerly Pokrovsk) on the Volga river in Russia today to the bustling industrial-revolution era town of Barmen in the German Rhineland. Here and elsewhere throughout this biography of Engels the man, the urban historian Hunt is never far from his first love. Hunt's Engels closely tracks Marx's emphatic dictum that history's great men are a product of social context: men may make their own history, but they do not make it as they wish. The intellectual, social, religious and most importantly economical milieu in which Engels moved are front and center of this story. Nevertheless, it is as an intellectual historian that Hunt excels here.

"Marx's General" is a distinctly intellectual biography. Hunt's strong skills as a writer are apparent in his ability to thoroughly convince the reader that Engels and his ideology were a clear product of his times, without belaboring the point at all. The story-telling is lively, the characters enjoyable. Perhaps most impressively of all, Hunt does justice to the complicated philosophical foundations of Hegelianism that formed the assumptions with which Marx and Engels approached their social science.

Despite its considerable strengths, the book suffers from erring perhaps too much on being an intellectual biography. Engels the man shines through in a few fascinating passages. He was an avid fox-hunter, his friendship with Marx was severely challenged when his not-quite-official wife died, and, surprisingly to me, Engels proved to be a raging (and, from the perspective of 21st century America, obnoxious) homophobe. Engels left a voluminous correspondence, but his personal life takes a distinctly diminished role in a book that goes into considerable depth on Engels' writings on Marxism. Whereas Marx and Lenin's personal lives were front and center in "Love and Capital" and Service's "Lenin", respectively and thus gave us a sense of how the ideologies of these characters emerged from their everyday experiences, the Engels of "Marx's General" seems to emerge largely from the historical conditions he experienced rather than his development as an independent person. Perhaps this is appropriate, given that Marx, Engels and Lenin had little use for the

view of individual thinkers as working in isolation of their social background. I can understand Hunt wanting to save space by omitting much details of Engels' fascinating personal life, and perhaps this won't be the book to do so. Hunt painted Engels the child and Engels the old man as fully human, whereas the Engels in Manchester seemed to exist largely through his social commentary and writings on scientific socialism. As a matter of personal taste, I found this a bit uneven. The focus on Engels' role in the cause during his Manchester years is by and large fine, except in one respect - Engels the businessman does not come through very clearly here, despite tantalizing hints of him being a competent, if at times abrasive, capitalist.

Despite this limitation, Hunt also sees the book as his opportunity to rescue Engels from the crude, mechanistic portrayal he has come to receive. In several effective passages (e.g., page 211-213), Hunt manages to quote a letter from Engels in which he renounces economic determinism as "if someone distorts (the materialist view of history held by Marx and myself) by declaring the economic moment to be the only determining factor, he changes that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, ridiculous piece of jargon." A more direct condemnation of the cult of dialectical materialism that emerged in the USSR could not be imagined.

Equally admirable is Hunt's epilogue, where he grapples seriously with the question of whether Engels bears the responsibility for the horrors of 20th century bolshevism. One needs to read Hunt's passages for oneself to get a feel for his case, but I note that I find his judgment on the matter fair and well-reasoned.

John says

What an excellent title Tristram Hunt gave to his book, one which is so apt. Engels was not your average revolutionary. Born into a well-heeled manufacturing family in Germany – the family being the principal employer in his home town, he did wear a frock-coat throughout his life. He also hunted with the Cheshire Hunt, one of the most prestigious foxhunting outfits in England. At that time he was working in the family firm in Manchester using his financial wherewithal to further the socialist/communist cause. A loyal (almost Christ-like loyalty!) friend to Karl Marx whose family he bankrolled for the rest of his life. Importantly he was Marx's collaborator and work slave, doing a lot of the written spade work for *The Communist Manifesto* and enabling Marx to write *Das Kapital*.

Engels' role was pivotal for Marx and Marxism: there to promote the great man and safe guard his legacy (Marx predeceasing his friend by over 10 years). Engels was happy to be in Marx's shadow even after his friend's death. His energy levels left me breathless, merely contemplating his punishing work schedules.

Whilst true to his beliefs and principles it was hard to avoid the conclusion that he was naive: eg lots of Marx family members hanging on to the Engels' frock-coated tails and expecting him to constantly bail them out of financial difficulties. His heart was in the right place and we follow him promoting the communist revolution throughout Europe and parts of the new world. That part of the book was not always easy for me to follow and my attention tended to wander. After his death Engels' name was given to a town in Russia, its inhabitants exhorted to honour comrade Engels' example throughout their slave-like lives. Ironically, like Engels, many of these inhabitants were of German origin. They would be scattered to the winds (and worse) by Uncle Joe on Hitler's invasion of Russia, perceiving them to be traitors to the cause and to their adopted country.

John says

Originally published in Britain as "The Frock-Coated Communist," this recent and celebrated biography of Engels is worthy of a recommendation. This, despite the author's social-democratic politics (or rather worse than social-democratic; since its publication, he has been installed as an unappetizing Blairite Labour Member of Parliament).

Hunt succeeds in bringing to life the debates of the Young Hegelians; the Revolution of 1848; Engels's pious and conservative family, and his own frustrations in helping to run the family business for 20 years; his skill as an agitator and organizer among workers, along with his lively participation in doctrinal squabbles; his womanizing; his epicurean wine consumption and fox-hunting; his then-unorthodox but loving relationships with two illiterate working-class Irish sisters. And above all, Hunt brings out the uniquely close relationship Engels had with Marx, in which Engels willingly subordinated his own talents in order to enable the full flowering of the unparalleled genius of his closest friend.

Hunt stumbles in his summation of the political significance of Engels's work. In his attempt to "exonerate" Engels for the mixed (at best) record of revolutionaries in the 20th century, Hunt "bends the stick" decidedly too far in the other direction. Against all reliable evidence that he has laid out in the preceding pages, Hunt concludes that Engels would have ended up a Menshevik; he also caricatures "Marxism-Leninism," for instance by portraying Lenin and his vanguard party concept as a throwback to Blanqui, which is nonsense. Revolutionaries of the twentieth century are accorded none of the sophisticated exposition that Hunt allots their 19th century forebears, and while this was not the subject of Hunt's book, he was at least obligated not to oversimplify too much, and he falls flat on that obligation.

These faults color the whole book, but they are most glaring only in the final chapter (epilogue), so the rest of the volume is still worth reading.

Simon Wood says

ENGELS: COMMUNIST, REVOLUTIONARY, FACTORY BOSS, "GENERAL", HUNTSMAN, WRITER, FEMINIST & ALL ROUND SOUND BLOKE

This is a fine, readable biography of Friedrich Engels in a similar vein to Francis Wheens "Karl Marx" but not such a virtuoso performance. It more than competently covers Engels rich and varied life, anchoring it in the context of his times, as he journeys from his birth place in Germany to exile in London with more than a few points in between. The tone of the book is generally sound, and not infrequently quite funny - as is Engels. . . and Marx for that matter. There is an element of finger wagging on Hunts part about some of Engels real or alleged misdemeanours, but I rather think M.A. Krul in his above (or below?) review is being rather too sensitive in regarding this as "hostility" towards Engels on Tristram Hunts part.

The philosophical roots and theory of Marxism are clearly explained for those of us, like myself, who are a little light on the nitty gritty of Marxist theory. Developments in Engels wide intellectual interests are giving room as well as his copious writings on issues as diverse as Communism, Science, Feminism, Family and Warfare. His relationship with Marx recieves ample coverage and it is evident from this, and other books Ive

read, that they got on like a house on fire: writing to each another daily and when they were both in London they visited each other daily aswell (and this despite Marxs perpetual cadging!). When Marx died Engels looked after his intellectual, aswell as his biological, offspring.

I was sorry that the book had to end which is always a good sign, and while there are a few quibbling problems with the book (which could have done with being polished up a little) I wouldnt hesitate to reccommend it to anyone whether or not they are ideologically committed, or even sympathetic, to Socialism.

Jackson Cyril says

Engels (to Marx): "I'm currently studying physiology." Marx (in reply): "On Mary or on somebody else?"

Conrad says

If that pest Karl Marx hadn't distracted Friedrich Engels from his studies with his interminable nagging for money, god only knows how different the 20th century would've turned out.

Engels managed to unite within himself a bitter loathing of the economic system that sustained him and a *libertinage* sadly lacking in Lenin, Marx, Mao, et al. He managed to identify and denounce the injustices of 19th century Europe with compassion that came from feeling that human existence is worth the effort of redeeming it, and while pushing the Revolution forward, he never suffered from the anhedonia of his fellow leftists.

God forbid I should ever fall prey to the orthodoxies of Marxism. Engelsism is another story.

jjonas says

A well-written biography of the less well-known half of the M&E partnership.

I've read a few Karl Marx biographies, but I think this Engels biography was more interesting than any of those. The book is easy to read, it contains the basic stuff that you'd expect from a biography, in chronological order, and includes all kinds of anecdotes and whatnot. So it's informative and entertaining at the same time. There is of course some more philosophical stuff that pertains to Engels's ideas – like on *The Dialectics of Nature*, where Hunt doesn't merely describe what Engels thought but scrutinizes it to some extent as well – but in the end, not that much. There could have been a bit more of that, but on the other hand the upper limit of what one can take comes very soon here unless the writer knows their stuff and is a good writer, so this was ok too.

The most interesting parts, or informative parts in the sense that I hadn't known that much about it before, were the sections after Marx's death where Engels becomes the great man of "Marxism". Consequently I would have liked to read a bit more about his exchanges with e.g. Bebel, Kautsky and Bernstein, but there's

very little of that.

The only part that I found clearly boring and non-informative was the epilogue, where Hunt tries to put Engels and his materialist conception of history into historical perspective and defend it from present-day pundits who like to see Stalin lurking behind it all. I agree with Hunt that that kind of accusation is far-fetched, but I don't know if that kind of operation was really necessary.

William West says

This is a fairly well done biography of Engels. I probably would have appreciated it more had I not recently read Jonathan Sperber's vastly superior "Karl Marx: A 19th Century Life" which, predictably covers a lot of the same history in a richer more fascinating way.

Where Sperber tries to explain the actions of individuals as symptoms of greater social moments, Hunt takes the more traditional, humanistic route of explaining a life through psychologizing and morally evaluating his subject, making history that written by individuals, rather than individuals the subjects of history. I'll confess that Hunt's ever so British habit of making "droll" nudge-nudge witticisms at every opportunity also irritated me.

Having said that, there is a lot of good information in the book, and it is generally well written. The most interesting parts were those describing Engels's life after Marx's death, when he became, for a few short years, the official "Great Man" of the early socialist movement.

Engels was, as Sperber notes in his book, more of a positivist than Marx ever was, and his attempts to turn Marxist thought into a system that explained all questions was extremely influential, in the worst ways, on the Bolsheviks. Interestingly, Engels was also a more practical man than Marx and towards the end of his life thought socialism could be achieved through the ballot box. He is thus, fairly or not, held by some to be the harbinger of Stalinist totalitarianism and others the first reformist Eurocommunist. Ouch.

Titus Hjelm says

I'm not enough of an expert to comment on the previous reviewer's dismay about Hunt's deficiencies in depicting 19th century Germany, but suffice it to say that whatever they are, they don't affect the central narrative enough to dismiss the whole book. In fact, most of the context of Engels's story is Victorian England, which clearly is the author's speciality. The narrative flows very nicely; the chronicle of Engels's life is coloured with contextual information and discussions of the 'supporting cast' including, obviously, Marx. There is the required womanising, drinking and gossip, but mostly the personal side of Engels is discussed in relation to the international socialist circles and his guarding of Marx's heritage. In the latter lies the one disappointment of the book: as much as the author makes of Engels being consciously the 'second fiddle' to Marx, he never offers an explanation. Why was this so? This is of course a notoriously difficult question to answer, and many have gone down the easy, narrow and most likely fallacious route of psychonanalysing their subjects (e.g. Radkau's Max Weber). However, some kind of 'theory'--no matter how tentative--would have been interesting and would have provided a lens through which to read the otherwise brilliant, but descriptive narrative.

Riley says

I learned a lot about Friedrich Engels through this book. I had been unaware of his background as a scion of the mill industry, and I did not know the sacrifices he made on behalf of Karl Marx. The biography also did a good job of stressing Engels' clear humanitarian impulses and intellectual rigor.

Here's what the author had to say about Engels given the Soviet Union:

"Engels was highly skeptical of vanguard-led, top-down revolutions like those with which communist parties seized power in the twentieth century. He always believed in a workers' party led by the working class itself (rather than by intellectuals and professional revolutionaries), and he remained adamant that the proletariat would arrive at socialism through the contradictions of the capitalist system and the development of political self-consciousness rather than by having it imposed upon them by a self-selecting communist leadership. 'The Social Democratic Federation over here and your German-American Socialists share the distinction of being the only parties that have contrived to reduce Marx's theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy which the working man is not expected to arrive at by virtue of his own class consciousness; rather it is to be promptly and without preparation rammed down his throat as an article of faith,' he complained pointedly to Adolph Sorge in May 1894. The emancipation of the masses could never be the product of an external agent, a political *deus ex machina*, even if it came in the form of V.I. Lenin. Moreover, as his support for the German SPD suggests, Engels was inclined toward the end of his life to advocate the peaceable, democratic road to socialism, acting through the ballot box rather than the barricades (while always retaining the moral right to insurgency). In the specific Russian context, it is most likely that Plekhanov's post-1917 'Menshevik' demands for a period of bourgeois rule and capitalist development before any effective transition to a socialist state would have been more in tune with Engels's thinking than the Bolshevik will to power."
