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Books & Arts

A biography of Friedrich Engels
A very special business angel

Aug 13th 2009
From *The Economist* print edition

The self-effacing friend who enabled "Das Kapital" to be written



Corbis

Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels. By Tristram Hunt. *Metropolitan Books*; 448 pages; \$32. Published in Britain as *"The Frock-Coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels"*. *Allen Lane*; £25. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

WHEN the financial crisis took off last autumn, Karl Marx's "Das Kapital", originally published in 1867, whooshed up bestseller lists. The first book to describe the relentless, all-consuming and global nature of capitalism had suddenly gained new meaning. But Marx had never really gone away, whereas Friedrich Engels—the man who worked hand in glove with him for most of his life and made a huge contribution to "Das Kapital"—is almost forgotten. A new biography by a British historian, Tristram Hunt, makes a good case for giving him greater credit.

The two men became friends in Paris in 1844 when both were in their mid-20s, and remained extremely close until Marx died in 1883. Both were Rhinelanders (our picture shows Engels standing behind Marx in the press room of *Rheinische Zeitung* which they edited jointly) but came from very different backgrounds: Marx's father was a Jewish lawyer turned Christian; Engels's a prosperous Protestant cotton-mill owner. Marx studied law, then philosophy; Engels, the black sheep of his family, was sent to work in the family business at 17. While doing his military service in 1841 in Berlin, he was exposed to the ferment of ideas swirling around the Prussian capital.

Next, he went to work for the Manchester branch of the family business, Ermen & Engels. Manchester's

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"cottonopolis" in the mid-19th century was a manufacturer's heaven and a working man's hell, and it provided an invaluable lesson for Engels: that economic factors were the basic cause of the clash between different classes of society. By 1845, when he was just 24, he had not only learnt how to be a successful capitalist; he had also written a coruscatingly anti-capitalist work, "The Condition of the Working Class in England", which charted the inhumanity of modern methods of production in minute detail.

Engels left Manchester to work with Marx on the "Communist Manifesto" and the two of them spent the late 1840s criss-crossing Europe to chase the continental revolutions of the time, ending up in England. Marx had started work on "Das Kapital", but there was a problem. He had by then acquired an aristocratic German wife, a clutch of small children and aspirations for a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle, but no means of support.

Engels (whose name resembles the word for "angel" in German) offered an astoundingly big-hearted solution: he would go back to Manchester to resume life in the detested family cotton business and provide Marx with the money he needed to write his world-changing treatise. For the next 20 years Engels worked grumpily away, handing over half his generous income to an ever more demanding Marx. He also collaborated intensively on the great work, contributing many ideas, practical examples from business and much-needed editorial attention. When at last volume I of "Das Kapital" was finished, he extricated himself from the business and moved to London to be near the Marx family, enjoying life as an *Economist*-reading rentier and intellectual.

Engels was an enigma. Gifted, energetic and fascinated by political ideas, he was nevertheless ready to play second fiddle to Marx. "Marx was a genius; we others were at best talented," he declared after his friend's death. Mr Hunt does a brilliant job of setting the two men's endeavours in the context of the political, social and philosophical currents at the time. It makes for a complex story that can be hard to follow but is well worth persevering with.

Tall and handsome, Engels had a taste not just for ideas but for the good life—wine, women, riding with the Cheshire hunt—and seems to have felt little sense of irony that all these things were paid for by the proletariat's back-breaking labour. His domestic life was much more unconventional than Marx's. He lived, on and off, with a semi-literate Irish working-class girl, Mary Burns; then, when she died, with her sister, Lizzy, whom he married only on her deathbed. He had no children, though he chivalrously took responsibility for a boy whom Marx had fathered with a housekeeper.

Engels's sacrifices continued after Marx's death. He not only carried on funding the Marx family and their various hangers-on, but also spent years pulling together the chaotic notes Marx left behind for volumes II and III of "Das Kapital". Inevitably there were lots of loose ends which Engels tied up as he saw

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rit, and sometimes the results were more revolutionary than the author may have intended. In volume III, where Marx discussed the tendency of companies' profitability to fall and noted that this might lead to the "shaking" of capitalist production, Engels substituted the word "collapse", opening up the text to much more radical interpretations by 20th-century Marxists.

When Engels died in 1895, he eschewed London's Highgate cemetery where his friend was laid to rest. Self-effacing to the last, he had his ashes scattered off England's coast at Eastbourne—the scene of happy holidays with the Marxes.

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