

# Engels's contradictions: a reply to Tristram Hunt

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In a recent and reasonably popular biography, Tristram Hunt charges Friedrich Engels with a series of class and gender contradictions: he condemned prostitution but enjoyed it himself; he looked askance at marriage and yet married Lizzy Burns on her deathbed; he was fully in favour of education for women and universal suffrage but could not tolerate the likes of Annie Besant or the women's rights campaigner Gertrud Guillaume-Schack; he lived a double life as cotton lord and revolutionary communist, a mill-owning Marxist who was objectively a bourgeois.<sup>1</sup>

## Solutions?

In short, Engels was a hypocrite. How does Hunt respond? He chooses not to leave Engels skewered on such unredeemable contradictions, dismissing him in standard bourgeois fashion as one who envied a life he simultaneously criticised. The problem for Hunt is that he develops, almost despite himself, a distinct admiration for Engels. As the story grows in the telling, Hunt increasingly attempts to retrieve Engels for his own political preferences (as

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1: Hunt, 2010, pp95-96, 138-41, 201-203, 265, 309-312. I leave aside other features of Hunt's biography (*Marx's General*, or *The Frock-Coated Communist* as it was titled in Britain), such as the superficial treatment and indeed marginalising of the crucial role of religion in Engels's life (pp14-18, 38-44, 71, 214-216, 240), or the historian's characteristic flatness when trying to describe philosophical systems such as those of Hegel and then Feuerbach (pp48-51), or missing the vital roles of Max Stirner (pp129-130) and Wilhelm Weitling (pp131-132).

of the 2010 elections in the UK, Hunt is the Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central). Engels thereby remains a continued source of profound insights into, among other things, the economic foundations of sexual oppression or the role of pleasure and celebration in a fully liberated life on the left. At the same time, Hunt is fully aware of the deep contradictions between the biographical and the political in Engels's life. To his credit, he does not attempt to airbrush out the less attractive features of Engels's life, but that leaves him with three options.

First, Hunt distinguishes between the personal and the political, for each of the contradictions outlined above indicates a tension between Engels's overtly political positions and his personal life. Having set up the contradictions in such a fashion, Hunt may now argue that the personal is not always political, that the message does not depend on the messenger; indeed, none of us are without contradictions. From here it is a short step to the conclusion that Engels's own life was—due to temperament and context—an incomplete realisation of the ideals he set forth. And those ideals remain deeply valuable—a lifelong opposition to all forms of exploitation, egalitarianism in terms of gender, a celebration of the fullness and pleasure of life.

The problem with such a solution is that it does not pursue the question deeply enough. Are personal and political options merely matters of individual choice or do structural elements play a role? Might it not be the case that the contradictions embodied in Engels indicate the contradictory nature of his socio-economic context? However, before answering those questions (which thereby set up the third solution), let me turn to Hunt's second way of dealing with the tensions between Engels's personal life and his political positions. The first solution (outlined in the previous paragraph) is to be found in a brief newspaper article called "Feminist Friend or Foe?", published in the *Guardian*.<sup>2</sup> Yet when we study the book-length biography, a different strategy emerges. Hunt mitigates most of the charges with which I began.

## Grisettes

On the question of prostitution, Engels in his mid-20s wrote to Marx in Paris:

It is absolutely essential that you get out of *ennuyante* [boring] Brussels for once and come to Paris, and I for my part have a great desire to go carousing with you. Either *mauvais sujet* [bad fellow] or schoolmaster; these are the only

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2: Hunt, 2009.

alternatives open to one here... If I had an income of 5,000 fr. I would do nothing but work and amuse myself with women until I went to pieces. If there were no Frenchwomen, life wouldn't be worth living. *Mais tant qu'il y a des grisettes, va!* [But so long as there are prostitutes, well and good!] <sup>3</sup>

Outside the strictures of his Calvinist family,<sup>4</sup> Engels could celebrate all that Paris had to offer: “I am indebted to Mr Delessert [the prefect of police] for some delicious encounters with *grisettes* and for a great deal of pleasure,” to be found in the “*bals* [dance-halls] Montesquieu, Valentino, Prado, etc”.<sup>5</sup> Yet a year later he was to write that prostitution is the “most tangible exploitation—one directly attacking the physical body—of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie”.<sup>6</sup>

How does Hunt mitigate such a contradiction? He stresses that even if “Engels had frequented boudoirs and brothels in his raffish youth, for much of his adulthood he lived according to his beliefs”,<sup>7</sup> or, more provocatively, in his very enjoyment of sexual pleasure, “the personal and the ideological fused gratifyingly together: he had a strong libido, a love for the company of women, and also an innate distaste for the bourgeois morality of marriage and monogamy”, so much so that these inclinations, initially expressed in the “gleeful enjoyment of Parisian night life”, would eventually “develop into a coherent theory of socialist feminism”.<sup>8</sup> All of which fits in with the scathing critiques of bourgeois criticisms of prostitution.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously, Hunt makes little of an account of the June 1848 revolution in Paris that highlights another dimension of prostitution: the agency of prostitutes themselves. Based in Cologne and writing for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Engels seeks to relate the grim events of the June struggles on the Paris streets between workers and defenders of capital. One particular barricade, on the Rue de Cléry, witnessed the first significant attack by the national guard:

Most of the barricade's defenders withdrew. Only seven men and two women, two beautiful young *grisettes*, remained at their post. One of the seven mounts the barricade carrying a flag. The others open fire. The national guard replies

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3: Engels, 1847 [1982], p115.

4: Engels, 1845b, pp28-30.

5: Engels, 1846 [1982], p91.

6: Marx and Engels, 1845-6, p559.

7: Hunt, 2010, p310.

8: Hunt 2010, p139.

9: Marx and Engels, 1848, pp502; Engels 1877-8, pp245.

and the standard-bearer falls. Then a *grisette*, a tall, beautiful, neatly-dressed girl with bare arms, grasps the flag, climbs over the barricade and advances upon the national guard. The firing continues and the bourgeois members of the national guard shoot down the girl just as she has come close to their bayonets. The other *grisette* immediately jumps forward, grasps the flag, raises the head of her companion and, when she finds her dead, furiously throws stones at the national guard. She, too, falls under the bullets of the bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

The agency of the two women depicted stands out in this text. Without fear in the face of fire,<sup>11</sup> one after the other they storm forward to take up the red banner, until they fall “under the bullets of the bourgeoisie”. Indeed, Engels was perpetually drawn to strong women who acted and spoke on their own initiative.<sup>12</sup> This approach to prostitution would become—in its own way—the staple of prostitute rights movements in the 20th century.

## Marriage

And in regard to the marriage—of some three or four hours—with Lizzy Burns, Engels was, as Hunt makes clear, all too aware of the compromise, let alone the fact that it was hardly a conventional marriage. Let me set the context. When Engels returned to Manchester in 1850, to work in the Ermen and Engels cotton mill, he resumed his relationship with Mary Burns, whom he had first met in Manchester in 1843. After Mary’s death some two decades later, Engels took up with her sister, Lizzy, who had been a housekeeper. Hardly conventional in either case, although the written material available on Mary is as scarce as it is plentiful for Lizzy. Mary may have been one of Engels’s first loves, causing some discomfort when he introduced her to revolutionary circles in Brussels a little later,<sup>13</sup> but when it comes to Lizzy, Engels writes of a fiery Fenian, a “revolutionary Irishwoman” to the core,<sup>14</sup> a woman of agency and action—precisely the women to whom Engels was drawn:

My wife was also of genuine Irish proletarian blood and her passionate feeling for her class, a feeling that was inborn, was of immeasurably greater value to

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10: Engels, 1848, pp131-132.

11: As Engels would write of his own experience of revolutionary conflict in Baden: “the much-vaunted bravery under fire is quite the most ordinary quality one can possess”—Engels, 1849, pp203.

12: See further in Boer, forthcoming.

13: Hunt, 2010, pp94-96, 125-126.

14: Engels, 1870, p96.

me and has been a greater standby at all critical junctures than anything of which the priggishness and sophistry of “heddicated” [*jebildeten*] and “sensitive” [*jefühlsvollen*] daughters of the bourgeoisie might have been capable.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the long story of Mary and Lizzy Burns, Engels had already settled on a very different approach to marriage. Other affairs and contests are hinted at,<sup>16</sup> and we stumble across lovers, seductions and prostitutes, but already by 1842 he had become rather averse to marriage. He writes to his sister, Marie, asking her not to play “any silly tricks by joining in the Barmen jumps, namely, the jump into engagement”, for the rush into marriage is enough to make him “despair of the human race”.<sup>17</sup> Later, of course, these stories of various modes of averting marriage would meld with his (and Marx’s) arguments concerning the hypocrisy of bourgeois marriage as serial and private prostitution,<sup>18</sup> or his observation that what is supposed to be bourgeois domestic bliss is in fact “a wedded life of leaden boredom”.<sup>19</sup>

How does the deathbed marriage to Lizzy fit in with such a lifelong aversion? In a brief letter on 12 September 1878, Engels wrote to his brother, Rudolf, “At half past one this morning my wife, to whom I had been legally married the previous evening, died peacefully after a long illness”.<sup>20</sup> As she faded, Engels, fully aware of the contradiction, had shown a true spirit of compromise, racing around the corner in order to obtain the services of a certain Reverend WB Galloway, who performed a simple marriage service under special licence according to the rites of the Church of England.

### **Fox-hunting cotton lord?**

Further mitigations follow: although Hunt plays up the contradictions of almost 20 years of Engels’s life in Manchester as a “cotton lord”, he ultimately recognises that Engels was himself deeply conscious of the compromise. On the one hand, Hunt plays up the tensions, if not hypocrisy, of the Manchester years: plunging into bourgeois life, becoming a member of the art gallery, Schiller Institute (library), Athenaeum, Brazenose Club, Manchester Foreign Library and Royal Exchange; a sharp eye for business;

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15: Engels, 1892, p378; 1869b, p341.

16: “As far as Jonghaus and his love are concerned, I have something to settle with him about that”—Engels, 1839, p410.

17 Engels, 1842, p544.

18: Marx and Engels, 1848, p502. See also the earlier draft presented first by Engels in the form of a catechism: Engels, 1847 [1976], p354.

19: Engels, 1884, p178.

20: Engels, 1878, p320.

shares in the Ermen and Engels firm; negotiating a disadvantageous deal when leaving the firm on his father's death (Engels had the right to demand equal partnership with the Ermens) that still left him with £12,500, or approximately \$2.4 million in 2010 figures; the subsequent investment in the stock market that left Engels with a portfolio of £26,400 upon his death, enough to support swathes of socialists—all of which was embodied in the spatial nature of the double life Engels lived. He kept two residences, one to keep up appearances as a partner in a major company and the other for the Burns sisters, a place that put him in touch with his preferred radical socialist circles.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the signal moment that embodies all these contradictions appears in Engels's love of fox-hunting with the Cheshire Hounds:

On Saturday I went fox-hunting—7 hours in the saddle. That sort of thing always keeps me in a state of devilish exhilaration for several days; it's the greatest physical pleasure I know. I saw only 2 out of the whole FIELD who were better horsemen than myself, but then they were also better mounted. This will really put my health to rights. At least 20 of the chaps fell off or came down, 2 horses were done for, 1 fox killed (I was in AT THE DEATH); otherwise no mishaps. Admittedly, there were no real fox-hunters at the meet; they ride far better than I do, of course.<sup>22</sup>

On the surface at least this is rather damning evidence, and Hunt pushes the contradictions as far as they will go. Yet at the same time he mitigates them. It was not merely that the “aggressively independent Engels enjoyed the freedom of manoeuvre these two distinct worlds provided”,<sup>23</sup> nor that they were necessary features of a life chosen in order to support Marx financially, nor even that without Manchester Marxism would not have become what it is,<sup>24</sup> but that Engels actually hated it. In exile from the 1848 revolutions on the Continent, penniless and desperate, Engels was forced into a humiliating compromise. Brokered by his favourite sister Marie, he came on

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21: As Engels writes to Marx in 1862, “I'm living with Mary nearly all the time now so as to spend as little money as possible; unfortunately, I can't dispense with my LODGINGS, otherwise I should move in with her altogether” (Engels, 1862a, p344; see also Engels, 1862b, p427).

22: Engels, 1857, p236. See also: Engels, 1858a, pp263–265; 1858b, p268.

23: Hunt, 2010, p181.

24: Apart from the fact that Engels's first stint in Manchester in 1843–4 produced two ground-breaking works that influenced Marx deeply—*The Condition of the Working Class in England* and “*Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*”—the raw data of Engels's day to day experiences in a major business made their way into Marx's *Capital*.

his knees to his wealthy father and thereby returned to the “huckstering” he thought he had left behind. In dank Manchester, he was constantly sending money to the Marxes, keeping up a respectable bourgeois appearance while preferring life with the Burns sisters and his socialist comrades, engaged in a business that was fundamentally exploitative—“In truth, the middle decades of Engels’s life were a wretched time”.<sup>25</sup> Or, more fully: “The effort at living in two worlds was exhausting, and the contradiction between public commitments and personal beliefs eventually sent Engels spiralling towards illness, depression, and breakdown”.<sup>26</sup> No wonder Engels exclaimed in a letter to Marx, when he had finally cut a deal to escape this life at the age of 49: “Hurrah! Today *doux commerce* is at an end, and I am free man”.<sup>27</sup>

But what of the fox hunts? Is that not the ultimate aristocratic venture? Why would Engels of all people be so seduced? In the end, it seems to have been one of the few physical pursuits left to someone who had been accustomed to swimming across chilly rivers, weeks-long hikes, extensive horse-rides with friends, fencing, military training and a general love of vigorous exercise. Not only was it a question of “going out into the country, this being a real necessity here in Manchester”,<sup>28</sup> but that it did him “a power of good”, a form of highly pleasurable physical exercise that helped put his “health to rights”.<sup>29</sup> In short, it was an escape from a hateful existence.

### **Strong women**

Yet one significant charge remains: Engels could, argues Hunt, not stand stuck-up, affected women, especially those with a strong opinion and the desire to make a political difference. As Engels wrote in a “Confession” for the Marxes’ young daughter, Jenny, “Your aversion: affected stuck up women”.<sup>30</sup> For Hunt, Engels’s habit of calling the suffragettes “Mother (Emily) Crawford”, “Mother (Gertrud Guillaume-)Schack” and “Mother (Florence Kelley-)Wischnewetzky”, as well as using phrases like “these little madams, who clamour for women’s rights”, betray a strain of misogyny.<sup>31</sup> However, a closer look at what Engels criticised among the suffragettes

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25: Hunt, 2010, p179.

26: Hunt, 2010, p180.

27: Engels, 1869a, p299.

28: Engels, 1845a, p514.

29: Engels, 1858a, p264; 1857, p236.

30: Engels, 1868, p541.

31: In full: “I refuse to allow these little madams, who clamour for women’s rights, to demand gallantry into the bargain—if they want to same rights as men they should submit to be treated as such”—Engels, 1889, p253.

casts a different light on his attacks: for Engels the suffragettes conveniently neglected class, precisely because it would undermine their own bourgeois status—what we would now call white, middle class liberal feminism. For instance, to Gertrud Guillaume-Schack, Engels wrote that although he supported equal wages until wages were abolished, all that campaigns for equality achieved was to enable women “to be as thoroughly exploited by the capitalists as the men are”.<sup>32</sup> All of which must be understood in the light of the fact that—noted already on a few occasions—Engels admired and was drawn to strong women who were their own agents.

### **Ambivalence**

Does all of the above mean that I have argued away the contradictions between Engels’s politics and his personal life? Not at all, for even with the various qualifications I have traced, either in Hunt’s work or in my own response, tensions remain. Thus far I have mentioned only a couple of rather incompatible solutions offered by Hunt—that we need to look past the contradictions, for the personal is not necessarily political and ad hominem arguments take us only so far, and then a perpetual effort to undermine the contradictions he has established.

But I also hinted at a third option, in which the very opposition of the personal and the political is problematic. In developing the accusation of hypocrisy, that one does not practise what one preaches, we assume that we as individuals have absolute choice in regard to our lives and politics. Should we espouse a politics that opposes economic, sexual and gendered exploitation, in favour of radical and as yet unimagined equality, then it is assumed we can simply choose to live our lives in such a manner. It becomes merely a matter of individual “lifestyle”, much like the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the amusements we seek. Should we fail to do so, then we are “hypocrites” (and the right gleefully seizes on such moments). Of course, such freedom to choose simply does not exist, for all our choices are constrained by the socio-economic conditions in which we live—that is, capitalism. Thus drives for a fair wage do so in the context of the fundamentally exploitative nature of the wage relation, fair trade operates within a framework in which trade itself is structured for profit, efforts to reform gender inequality run up against structurally sexist institutions, and so on. In other words, the desire for a new and better world must be realised in the context of the old. That situation is bound to produce a few contradictions.

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32: Engels, 1885, p312.



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