

**“Mere Auxiliaries to the Movement”: Marx’s and Engels’s “love interest”**

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## Abstract

This paper explores the way that four women have been framed as wives and/or mistresses and/or sexual partners in the biographical reception of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) as heterosexual men. These women were (Frau) Jenny Marx (*née* von Westphalen) (1814-1881), Helene Demuth (“Lenchen”) (1820-1890), Mary Burns (1821-1863), and Lydia Burns (aka “Mrs Lizzie,” and only on *her* deathbed, Mrs Frederick Engels) (1827-1878). How exactly they appear in the contemporary texts and rare images that survive is less interesting than the determination of subsequent biographers to make them fit a mold, or in this case, two molds – gendered and classed. The sub-genres through which biographers construct only somewhat variable narratives about these women – and their various circumstances and relationships – needs investigation. This paper presents a typology that testifies to malestream authorial incuriosity, and offers significant criticisms of intellectual biography as an established genre. It argues that a positive interest in these women results in a significantly different view of Marx and Engels as historical figures, shifting them from “great thinkers” to political activists, and thus a revised view of the context for their works and writings.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Jenny Marx, Mary Burns, Lydia Burns, Helene Demuth, Henry Frederick Lewis Demuth, intellectual biography, feminist history.

## “Mere Auxiliaries to the Movement”:<sup>1</sup> Marx’s and Engels’s “love interest”

Since the early twentieth century biographers have agreed on the “significant others” (female) in the lives of two “great” men of social theory and – in their lifetimes and as inspirations afterwards – “great” political activists for the cause of international socialism: Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Over the years biographies of the two have drifted more towards the theory (sometimes as science, sometimes as philosophy) side of things, rather than the more quotidian activism they actually engaged in. Indeed as part of this process, some of the “activist” writings became theoretical (one way or another) or alternatively have been consigned to a lesser category of interest (usually journalism or correspondence, occasionally historical or polemical works, and the like).

Over 40- or 50-year careers each man had a role in presenting himself to a reading (and only very occasionally listening) public, but of course neither knew (or at least was not fully aware of the process) that he would become a “great thinker” whose selected and eventually collected and purportedly complete works would become available in popular and scholarly formats. Biographers and commentators have constructed the two as an important pair, and their relationship (however construed) as an important part of their individual as well as joint works (of which only three were formally of this status). They are now, and have been for about 125 years, an important part of global culture, even popular culture, and certainly in many educational systems a staple of historical knowledge and required reading (generally in excerpts).

Texts have authors, and authors have biographies. Intellectual biographies already presume that it is the “great” works that interest us, and biographical details are thus ancillary to that, providing explanatory contextualization and occasional light relief and human touches. This is where the now familiar “love interest” arises, and where the women we are concerned with are firmly parked. Of the four, only Frau Jenny Marx<sup>2</sup> speaks to us directly from the printed page in her “Short Sketch of an Eventful Life” and additionally in items of her correspondence as preserved.<sup>3</sup> The other three appear as reported speech in correspondence or public records, and in all four cases there isn’t all that much to go on. Nor are biographers all that interested in bursting out from this framing, though there are very occasional exceptions.<sup>4</sup> Even in those cases it’s clear that we’re interested in these women as “real people” only because of their association with men who are already – and indubitably – known to be “great.”

Here is a *compte rendu* of received “truths” about the four, easily referenced from any standard biography:

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Teresa Brennan and Carole Pateman, “‘Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth’: Women and the Origins of Liberalism,” *Political Studies* 27:2 (1979), pp. 183-200.

<sup>2</sup> Her eldest daughter was also named Jenny, often referred to as “Jennychen,” dying shortly after her mother and predeceasing her father by a few months.

<sup>3</sup> The English-language Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* in 50 volumes (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-2004) contains selections; for her memoir, see Institute of Marxism-Leninism (ed.), *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> See Gavin McCrea, *Mrs. Engels: A Novel* (New York: Catapult Books, 2015). Again we learn nothing that isn’t already “known” from the archive, and the imaginative exercise here – stream-of-consciousness narrative in a *faux* Irish idiom – makes me squirm. Unlike Gabriel – and probably necessarily, given the lack of testimony – McCrea can’t really give us a very informed picture of Engels’s associates and activities, other than the Marxes.

Jenny Marx *née* von Westphalen (1814-1881): Karl's childhood sweetheart through a long engagement, faithful companion and homemaker, 7 times pregnant, 6 live births, 3 surviving daughters, married "down" from a wealthy and cultured German family (with Scottish aristocratic connections), small pox victim, amanuensis and – in rather patronizing terms – a political "fighter," albeit relentlessly domestic shadow of Marx's genius (and obsessions), predeceasing her husband by a few months, and generally regarded as a tragic figure battling debt, disease, infant death and an unfaithful husband (but see below under Helene Demuth).

Helene Demuth (1820-1890): servant girl from Jenny and Karl's hometown of Trier in Rhenish Prussia, imported to Brussels in 1845 to help Jenny with small children, and, as often with 19<sup>th</sup> century nannies, remaining till death as senior domestic and sometime nanny to Marx's grandchildren; not notably recorded in correspondence until she succeeded to Engels's domestic establishment after the death of "Mrs Lizzie," making an occasional appearance as politically conscious when Engels reminisces about the "old days." After the archival discovery of a typewritten copy of the hitherto unknown "Freyburger letter" in 1962 she becomes a major character in the Marx/Engels biographical register, owing to her pregnancy and delivery of an illegitimate son Henry Frederick Lewis Demuth in 1851; in the letter (which appears to have been written and received in 1898) Louise Freyburger (former wife of Karl Kautsky and yet another Engels housekeeper, d. 1950) alleges – in prose of high Victorian deathbed melodrama – that Marx was the father of "Freddy" (d. 1929).<sup>5</sup>

Mary Burns (1821-1863): Engels's companion and presumed mistress, a relationship arising from an early visit to Manchester; a "mill girl" of Irish origin, probably illiterate, credited with guiding Engels through the industrial slums, and subject of his grief at her early death (and occasioning a much noted remonstrance in correspondence to Marx about the latter's apparent indifference); a figure in some accounts with which to taunt the Marxes for sniffyness concerning the pair's unmarried status, or alternatively a figure with which to congratulate Engels for his "brave" defiance of bourgeois marital norms; conversely a figure of a "kept" woman "in the suburbs" exploited by a mill-owner's son and rich bourgeois "man about town."

Lydia Burns (1827-1878): Mary's sister and successor to her as Engels's housekeeper/companion, rather more recorded in correspondence than Mary, and apparently in a rather more respectable status (the Marxes in their very late years made seaside excursions with the unmarried pair); occasionally but posthumously noted as Engels's wife, though without the obvious conclusion that a marriage on *her* deathbed meant that she couldn't possibly inherit any of his wealth or cause any concern for his impeccably bourgeois family back in Germany (she never accompanied Engels on his visits "home"); fondly remembered by Marx's daughter Eleanor for her visits as a teenager to Engels's abode in Manchester (female champagne-drinking on a hot afternoon "without stays"), and also probably illiterate.

### *Genre trouble*

Biographers are almost always incurious about their genre, not least because any undue curiosity will undo what they are trying to do in the first place. Moreover as Hayden White<sup>6</sup> argued some years ago, form determines content, so Marx and Engels are secured in that way as "great" men and

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed study of this claim, and a critique of scholarly credulity in relation to it, see my online article <https://www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/terrell-carver/article.htm>

<sup>6</sup> *Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990 [1987]).

“great” writers. And – as Judith Butler<sup>7</sup> might argue – repetition secures naturalization, so Marx and Engels – in terms of their biographical “lives” – have “become” the Marx and Engels we (already) know, so any significant departures from this wouldn’t make the “lives” theirs anymore. The genre secures the narrative in a firmly but undramatically chronological way, moving forward from birth to death to afterlife, enlivened (at least somewhat) by an internal dramaturgy of “crucial” developments, breaks, setbacks, achievements and failures tidily incorporated within an early/middle/late periodization.

This familiar framework produces oddly teleological simulacra, viz. the youthful and middle-aged subjects seem already to have grown the grey beards by which we know them from their posthumous reception. This reception has sanctified, demonized and iconized them into familiar characters, and it is those “great” characters which stalk the younger men through the traces of their activities and thoughts to the extent that have stuck in the records from which biography arises; the youthful avatars of Marx and Engels are thus always striving to become the “great” men and “great” thinkers that we want to know about.

Obviously this is teleological in that Marx and Engels as youths and middle-age men didn’t know that they were striving for future “greatness,” or at least not in exactly the ways that this turned out to be. In fact the meaning and significance of anything that they were actually doing was of course indeterminate and open-ended at the time. Biographers give this away when they slip into a characteristic verbal tense, the “was-to” locution, e.g. “Here Marx *was to* live out his life, write his best works, end his days,” etc. This merely tells us that the genre isn’t organized around lived-experience as it was to the subject, but rather around making and re-making a subject familiar to us as “great” through fictive prose (which creates “knownness” and “factuality” through its referential certainty and stylistic dryness).

Unsurprisingly, male or at least masculinized biographers are happy enough with these four women as auxiliaries to the “great” men, and find the marginalizing and patronizing discourse of helpmeet domesticity easy to repeat. After all it is familiar enough, doesn’t generally cause questions (though see below), and anyway how could it be otherwise? Some people simply are more important (to posterity) than others, and domesticity is hardly the realm of “greatness.” Indeed what would it mean to the world if it were? Significance is organized for us around a public/political sphere, even if the “great” men as “great” thinkers were – in some cases, though not the present ones – notably sequestered and otherworldly (Kant seems to be the icon here). Or in other words it is reception which makes a man “great” and “great” as a thinker, and reception usually comes late in life, and in Marx’s case is really posthumous.<sup>8</sup>

### *Ecce femina!*

Getting women into the mold of “greatness” has been a notable achievement of feminism and feminists, particularly historians. Women who did what men did often got erased (or worse) from the historical record, or nearly so, and recovering the traces, and using biographical and bibliographical means to produce “greatness” for women, is making progress, not least in highlighting what caused the erasure (or worse) in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Asking the “Enloe question”

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<sup>7</sup> *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1999 [1990]).

<sup>8</sup> See my “Making Marx Marx,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Kapp’s two-volume biography of Marx’s daughter Eleanor is a classic of this type, since Eleanor had a “public” life in the 1890s as a noteworthy activist in the British trade union movement as well as some (quite limited) cachet as “Marx’s daughter”; see *Eleanor Marx*, vol. 1: *Family Life 1855-1883* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972), and *Eleanor Marx*, vol. 2: *The Crowded Years 1884-1898* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976).

("Where are the women?")<sup>10</sup> and using the "gender lens" (as feminists have developed this) are both good ideas. So in the case of these women what do these methodological insights lead us to think that is different from what we already know about them, as presented to us in scores of intellectual biographies of Marx and Engels?

At first glance, not very much. Since the 1970s these women have been recovered from (relative) obscurity, and made subjects of biographies (or at least of chapters or disquisitions within biographies or biographical works). More of the archival materials have been written into the biographical record – which is what biographers do – so we have a more detailed "picture" of what they were like – or anyway what they might have been like at times, were we to drop in and visit. Since there is hardly anything of a "public," and therefore significant character about what they were doing, they remain who they were, and where they were, which was essentially "private." Of course this was not necessarily domestic: Mary Burns (and presumably Lydia Burns as well) had some kind of life at least with factory workers, if not actually within factory walls – we don't know for sure and have to rely on supposition. They seem to have achieved a "situation" in 19<sup>th</sup> century economic terms, although the evidential basis for this is inference, and double-binds abound: Engels has been taxed for not having provided either "companion" with literacy, graces and social advancement, but then had he done this he would surely be super-taxed as a "Professor Higgins" control-freak out of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In this female/domestic sub-genre within biographical "greatness" for men, the four women emerge as heroines of the hearth, or in Frau Marx's case, also of "fair copy" penmanship (and gruesome physical suffering).

It is possible, however, to push a bit harder on this, given that the introduction of "woman" at all into *faux*-generic-masculinized narratives<sup>11</sup> will have repercussions that don't necessarily lead us to see what we already know and feel comfortable with (including being comfortable in our outrage at their exclusion and marginalization). In his recent door-stop biography Jonathan Sperber<sup>12</sup> aimed to present a "Nineteenth-Century Life" of Marx and thus – somehow – recover him differently from previous biographers, who have pursued him as the subject of intellectual biography. The subtitle actually functions as a get-out: Sperber doesn't deal at all well with Marx's "thought" and even his renditions of others' summaries are obviously poor, contradictory and don't add value to previous commentary. But a different kind of "life" is an interesting idea, though we get no sense from him of what "nineteenth-century-ness" in a life would be.

By contrast Mary Gabriel's recent study<sup>13</sup> of the Marxes' marriage is rather more interesting, though not because we learn anything that we didn't already know from the archive, at least in outline; Gabriel has indeed highlighted and developed some interesting details, and made good use of memoir material that others have overlooked or abbreviated (and she has even shown some overt skepticism and caution in her interpretation of this kind of testimony, which is unusual). But we get the Jenny Marx we know already, albeit with center-stage treatment (and an artful avoidance of patronizing perspectives). The subtitle is interestingly and engagingly ambiguous: "And the Birth of a Revolution," which does seem to link the (merely) domestic with the (importantly) world-historical. But does it? Let's look harder at this supposed distinction.

### *Marx make-over*

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<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, new edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014 [1989]).

<sup>11</sup> See my "'Public Man' and the Critique of Masculinities," *Political Theory* 24:4 (1996), pp. 673-686.

<sup>12</sup> *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York: Liveright, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011).

Gabriel's book inverts the usual format of the intellectual biography because it has a non-intellectual subject, or at least one who didn't publish much, and then not on any subjects outside her own life as wife and mother. The chronological spine of her book is thus chapterized in wholly political/geographical terms (rather than at least mostly chapterized per "great work," as in conventional intellectual biography, thus keeping the "great thinker" focus). By contrast Gabriel's focus on Jenny and her life-experience thus has the effect of filling over 500 pages with quotidian detail: where the Marxes were living, who came to visit and conspire, what dramas played out in financial terms, how extended family relations were pursued (or not), and a fair amount of gossipy who-thought-what-of-whom-and-why (at least possibly, given that we don't of course have full access to the thoughts and emotions of those involved, who didn't always completely know exactly what they were doing, anyway).

Gabriel's attention to these details thus begins to alter what we already "know" from intellectual biographies. In that genre, for example, the "flights" between 1845 and 1849 – from Paris to Brussels and back to Paris and then on to Cologne and back to Paris and on to London – all merit a mention, including an episode in which both Marxes were arrested and held in separate cells for a time. But in conventional intellectual biographies all this revolutionary clutter (and clatter) interrupts the conventional trek from juvenilia and early works through to the later writings and manuscripts. Moreover Marx's real-life revolutionary mates, who were in and around these quotidian upheavals, haven't made it to "greatness," since they didn't function at the time or even later as world-class intellectuals, whereas Marx's encounters with Hegel, Feuerbach, Smith and Ricardo (etc.) are obviously of enduring interest (though noted at the time as *political* encounters, not academic ones of academic interest). Anyway the real-life revolutions of 1848-1849 are well known to have "failed," even if revisionists abjure such summary judgments, hence the demise of Marx's associates as small-timers and his rescue as a "great" thinker.

By adopting a Jenny-centered perspective, Gabriel's chapters on geographical/political clutter (and clatter) begin to do something different. It is not that she has "uncovered" materials previously unknown (there really aren't any to find, most likely). Rather the point of view has shifted, and not just because it's Jenny's. What's happened is that briefly recounted and supposedly uninteresting events and episodes suddenly come to life and occupy much more narrative time and space: for example, Jenny's incarceration (as a very respectable middle-class woman in a prison cell with "criminal-class" females and "common" prostitutes) becomes much more harrowing, for both her and her husband. And Marx's mates – Willich, Schapper, "Lupus" and Wolf (there were two), Herwegh, Freiligrath and numerous others of the '48ers and later acquaintances along the way – all come to life as real characters, worthy of attention, since they are significant in Jenny's life (if not in later world-historical terms). We don't know, in most cases, the exact significance to Jenny of any of these men (and occasionally their female "partners") at various times; what we know is that she was there in the space where they were, there wasn't much space in any of these lodgings, and the spaces were hers as much as Marx's.

This perspective necessarily centers the domestic scene but in a way that shows how the public/private divide – as feminists have demonstrated – is a metaphor for the sequestration and marginalization of women, not a spatial division that separates the political from anything else, or a natural or obvious hierarchy of significance, intellectual or otherwise. We get quite a different sense of where the men are, namely they are in and out of the Marxes' lodgings, and that this is as good a "public" sphere as any. Indeed given the authoritarian politics of the time, it was where their "public" space as mates had to be (and even then it was spied on, though we're not sure exactly who did this anonymous work).

Along with his mates, Marx emerges in a different light, not least because his “great” works play such a minor role in the biographical narrative (rather refreshingly, since Gabriel is a journalist who doesn’t overestimate her gifts at understanding them and adding value to previous commentary). Thus Gabriel’s work also begins to tell us more about life from Marx’s perspective – and to present something rather closer to his life-experience – than intellectual biographers can manage. It is not just that he is “rounded” or “humanized” as lover, husband and father (along with Sperber, Gabriel is convinced that Karl and Jenny had potentially scandalous and quite risk-averse premarital sexual experiences). It is that we see him much more as he was, in quite a messy *medias res*, scheming and writing along with others, and writing as an activist for the times (not as a “great” thinker for posterity).

Gabriel’s revisioning of Marx thus has some potentially interesting consequences, particularly in relation to what his “great” works were supposed to be about, and in particular, what they were supposed to be *for*. Within Gabriel’s narrative it’s less easy to see these as purely cerebral encounters with (other) “great thinkers,” which is the conventional trope of intellectual biography, simply because there is so much political maneuvering going on in the foreground, i.e. in the domestic domain. This homelife is no longer a convenient and auxiliary space to Marx’s “real” albeit supposedly quite abstract activities, but rather at the center of what he was trying to do when he was trying to write and publish as a political activist within real-life political circles and coalitions. Even when he was out of the house at the British Museum Reading Room or (on occasion) down at the pub or (quite rarely) at some kind of public or semi-public meeting or venue, it doesn’t follow that life at home was completely “other” to these activities, or that it was in any case necessarily less important as a place in which to do politics. In fact, unlike the Reading Room, it actually was a place in which to do politics with what Marx was writing and thinking. From this perspective, then, the “domestic” tribulations sometimes mentioned in connection with Marx are not so much an interruption to his “great” works and “great” thoughts as the medium and space through which these thoughts arose in his mind as they did (whether helped or hindered by quotidian considerations and visitors) and through which as published works they emerged as artifacts (or were preserved tied into bundles and – quite carefully – stored for safe-keeping). What emerges from Gabriel’s presentation is a gendered but seamless mode of production.

Possibly something of the same would apply to Engels and his activist and writerly arrangements, but we mostly don’t know very much about his associates and activities (at the office or at home or otherwise), though a good guess is that Helene Demuth (and the surviving Marx daughters, Laura and Eleanor) had something to do with the preservation of his papers, along with Marx’s, over which Engels acted as literary executor. There is a material process of production here, even if the premises weren’t self-denominated as a factory, and whether or not these households were in the same city or connected virtually through the (very frequent) postal services. Some digging through Engels’s correspondence might be useful here, not to find out what he thought, but to find out who was dropping in.

### *Conclusions*

What counts as “great” may ultimately be intellectual for all of us, but how Marx and Engels got there by means of published and manuscript works should now look rather different. The works and writings themselves begin to look more importantly embedded not just in the quotidian but in politics as a lived-experience, and lived-experience looks rather more agonistic in terms of emotional engagement with family and mates, rather than as something extraneous or merely contextual to cerebral cogitation. If the “great” men and “great” works were re-envisioned as (both) emerging from a spatial framework that was essentially domestic, then domestic space (and “domestics”)

wouldn't be so ancillary to the intellectual biography, nor would the "auxiliaries" who inhabited it, even if not that much survivable material by them or about them was created and then preserved. This novel view also begins to challenge the backward projection of "greatness" on to circumstances such that biographized characters are presented as living their lives in an impossibly "knowing" way.

Interestingly the book-centered (rather than people-centered) genre of intellectual biography emerges as highly gendered, not simply by excluding or marginalizing women (and children), but because it makes men into minds rather than bodies, and their books and manuscripts into metonyms for themselves as human beings taken in some abstract, disembodied sense. It is not Marx and Engels who need "humanizing," as biographers have claimed when lightening up the intellectual commentary with oddities and anecdotes;<sup>14</sup> it is the works themselves which need "humanizing" as political interventions (not just intellectual encounters), where political interventions are understood as emotional engagements among interacting associates, whatever the setting.

"Where are the women?" is always a good question. But the men aren't necessarily elsewhere, and politics can be anywhere. Archive material doesn't speak for itself, as any biographer would acknowledge, but there are more (and certainly less) critical yet imaginative ways to help it along. Unfortunately the malestream practice of backgrounding lived-experience extends to the organizational hierarchy of collected and selected works (which is the medium through which the archive (which is an idea, rather than a singular secured space) reaches readers. The division of the writings of Marx and Engels into Works (other than *Capital*), *Capital* and Economic Writings, Correspondence, and finally Notebooks and Miscellany (as in the current Berlin-based *Marx-Engels-Ausgabe* edition)<sup>15</sup> actually divorces "great texts" from such records of lived-experience as we have, and makes diary-like reconstructions of context quite difficult. In intellectual biography the political/geographical therefore gives way to the cerebral/intellectual, though as we have seen, this genre requirement can be resisted. A revisioning of Marx and Engels as political activists immersed in lived-experience (not just in cogitating headwork) might not count as feminist history. But it could well be feminist-inspired.

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<sup>14</sup> Two recent "popular" biographies are squarely in this genre; see Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000 [1999]), and Tristram Hunt, *The Frock-coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (London: Allen Lane, 2010 [2009]; New York: Picador, 2010, under the title *Marx's General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels*).

<sup>15</sup> For the principles and progress of this mammoth scholarly project, underway since 1975 and still unfinished, see <http://mega.bbaw.de/>