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“Mere Auxiliaries to the Movement”<1>: How intellectual biography obscures Marx’s and Engels’s gendered political partnerships

Terrell Carver, Professor of Political Theory, University of Bristol, UK

t.carver@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

Four women have been conventionally 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 Jenny Marx (*née* von Westphalen) (1814-1881), Helene Demuth (“Lenchen”) (1820-1890), Mary Burns (1821-1863), and Lydia Burns (1827-1878). How exactly they appear in the few contemporary texts and rare images that survive is less interesting than the determination of subsequent biographers of the two “great men” to make these women fit a familiar genre, namely intellectual biography. An analysis of Marx-Engels biographies shows how this masculinized genre enforces an incuriosity that makes gendered political partnerships unthinkable and so invisible. By contrast a positive interest in these women that rethinks what a gendered political partnership is, or could be, results in a significantly different view of the two men. As historical figures, they shift from being individualized or paired-with-each-other “great thinkers” to communist/socialist activists working in and through everyday spaces and material practices. Their pamphlets, articles and books thus appear more as immediate political interventions and less as timeless theorizing, or as the raw material for such intellectualizing re-constructions.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Jenny Marx (wife), Mary Burns, Lydia Burns, Helene Demuth, Henry Frederick Lewis Demuth, intellectual biography, feminist history, public/private distinction.

Biographers have agreed on the “love interests” (heterosexual) and “significant others” (female), and thus their marginal role by definition, in the lives of two “great men” of social theory, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). None of these four women was known to be an author of any such great works or otherwise recorded great thoughts, and were therefore minor figures – if that – in conventional intellectual biographies. During their lifetimes Marx and Engels constructed themselves as political activists, contributing novel ideas to various incarnations of an international movement promoting democratic understandings of communism/socialism. The “biographizing” of Marx and Engels began in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the two “great men” were posthumously reconstructed in the political struggles of the times, and in that way remembered from the then-recent past as “great” political activists for the cause.

Over the one hundred or so years since that time, however, biographies of the two have drifted away from their day-to-day political activisms,<2> and more towards the social theory side of things, albeit with dutiful nodding to their democratizing revolutionary ambitions and their presumed political failures (for the most recent, see Stedman Jones 2016; for a critical review, see Carver 2016). Thus what were novel ideas in an original activist context were framed by biographers in later years in an intellectualized context, sometimes as science, sometimes as philosophy, sometimes as both together, rather than focusing on the more quotidian activisms that Marx and Engels and their female partners actually engaged in. Engels himself began this process, praising Marx as a new Hegel from

1859, and as the equal of Darwin from 1883 (Carver 1983; 2003, 38-94; for contrary views, see Rigby 2007 [1992]; Hunley 1991). As the substance and mode of mid- to late-nineteenth century activism has faded, so this theoretical framing was an easy cue for biographers, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, to take up. The conventions for writing intellectual biographies of these two “great men,” so I argue here, have produced a highly gendered view of the personnel, politics and projects of their lives and times that is radically untrue to the lived experience of those concerned. This misprision is most especially true of their gendered political partnerships with their “significant others.”

Over forty- or fifty-year careers each man had a role in presenting himself to a reading public, and in more limited ways as a political speaker, most often in clandestine circumstances. But of course neither knew of, or at least was not fully aware of, the processes through which he would become a “great thinker” – or in Engels’s case, “second-fiddle” to a “great thinker” (Riazanov 1973 [1927], 216-17). And they were unaware that their selected and eventually collected and purportedly complete “great works” would become available in popular and scholarly formats. Biographers and commentators have constructed the two as an important pair, and their relationship – however this is construed – as an important feature of their individual as well as joint works. While the two are known to have conversed via the correspondence that is preserved, and are known to have spoken at length when co-located, the singular authorship of the vast majority of their archive is very well established.

As part of the twentieth-century process of reception, some of the then-ephemeral activist writings by the two became academic social theory *malgré lui*. This reception took place through a process of de-contextualisation and reframing of the authors as theorists, and thus creating a canon of major and minor works, some of which were editorial

reconstructions from notes-to-self or other manuscript writings simply left aside (Carver and Blank 2014; Rojahn 2002). Thus this process of persona-construction and “great man” reception does not merely marginalize women and perforce gendered political partnerships. Rather, it is also definitional for the twin genres of intellectual biography and canonical republication, i.e. the “great man” and his “great works.”

Intellectual biographies already presume that it is the “great works” that interest us, so the biographical details of the “great man” are thus ancillary to that, providing explanatory contextualization and occasional “humanizing” anecdotes. These latter are typically constituted through brief episodes of tragedy, such as the births and/or deaths of offspring and/or partners, and by whatever comedic moments, as recorded, happen to appeal to the biographer as amusing (see, for example, Wheen, 2000 [1999]; Hunt, 2009). This zone of contrast is where the now familiar “love interests” and “significant others” arise, and where the women we are concerned with are firmly located. They appear briefly, here and there, as sexual objects, as actual or potential child-bearing subjects, and as repositories for anxieties and helpmeets for consolation.

Intellectual biography is thus a masculinized genre because these terms invoke an unquestioned public/private distinction. As documented by feminist scholarship this distinction constructs the sole and subordinated way through which women become barely visible in intellectual biographies, and in malestream political theorizing generally, as “mere auxiliaries” (see, for example, Elshtain 1993 [1981]; Lloyd 1993 [1984]; Pateman 1997 [1988]; and other sources too numerous to cite).

Of the four women, only Jenny Marx<3> speaks to us directly from the posthumously printed pages of her manuscript “Short Sketch of an Eventful Life,” and additionally in a relatively small number of items of her correspondence as preserved,

though incompletely collected, in canonical editions of Marx's and Engels's works.<4> In this article Jenny Marx figures much more than the other three women, which is a consequence of her ability to generate a historical record in her own hand, so it is mostly from those materials – and from what is recorded about her by men in the archive – that my genre-critique develops. The other three women appear only as reported speech in rare items of correspondence or very occasional public records, and in all four cases there isn't all that much to go on.

Genre trouble

Biographers are almost always incurious about their genre, not least because any undue curiosity would undo what they are trying to do in the first place. Moreover as Hayden White (1990 [1987]) influentially argued, form determines content, so Marx and Engels are secured in that way as “great men” and “great thinkers” by the genre itself. Marx and Engels – in terms of their biographical “lives” – have become the Marx and Engels we already know, so any significant departures from this would not make the “lives,” which we expect to learn more about, theirs anymore. The genre of intellectual biography secures this narrative as factual in a firmly but undramatically chronological way, moving forward from birth to death to afterlife, though this is usually enlivened, at least somewhat, by an internal dramaturgy of highlighted crucial developments, breaks, setbacks, achievements and failures. These familiar tropes are tidily incorporated, as a rule, within an early/middle/late periodization.

Biographers are not all that interested in bursting out from the characteristic framing that the intellectual biographizing of “great men” imposes, though there are very rare exceptions.<5> Even in those exceptional cases it is clear that we are meant to be interested

in these women only because of their association as “auxiliaries” with the two men, who are already and indubitably known to be “great minds” thinking “great thoughts.”

This well-worn framework produces oddly teleological simulacra, viz. the youthful and middle-aged subjects seem already to have grown the much-pictured grey beards, as in the case of Marx and Engels, by which we know them from their posthumous reception. This reception has sanctified, demonized and iconized them into familiar characters (Carver 2017, 16-30), and it is those “great thinkers” who stalk the younger men through the traces of their activities and thoughts to the extent that suitable materials have stuck in the records from which intellectual biography arises. The youthful avatars of Marx and Engels are thus always striving to become the “great men” and “great thinkers” that we know them to be. Other matters are generally marginalized as false starts or distractions, or in the case of people, re-imagined as merely minor characters. These observations, of course, are not exclusive to intellectual biographies of Marx and Engels, or to men – or, if conforming to the masculinized genre, women – who have been constructed through reception as “great.” <6>

Conventional intellectual biography is therefore teleological in that the meaning and significance of anything that the subject – in the case, Marx and Engels – were actually doing in living a life which was indeterminate and open-ended at the time. Biographers give their game 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 biographical genre is not organized around lived-experience as it was to the subject, but rather around making and re-making a subject familiar to us as “great.” This reality effect is achieved by means of fictive prose and a subjunctive mood, which creates “knownness” and “factuality” through its tropes of referential certainty and “serious” stylistic dryness.

Unsurprisingly, male or 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, does not generally cause questions (though see the discussion below of Gabriel 2011), and anyway how could it be otherwise? Some people simply *are* more important to posterity than others, because they constitute and reference masculinity as a necessary qualification for, and criterion of, importance. Since public man outshines private woman, and because those tropes are important ways to make people and activities easily intelligible to biographers and readers alike, domesticity can hardly be the realm of “greatness.” Indeed what would it mean to the world of public man if it were?

Significance is conventionally organized around a public/political sphere, even if the “great men” as “great thinkers” were – in some cases, though not the present ones – notably self-sequestered and otherworldly. Immanuel Kant has been iconized in this way as the quintessential “great man” thinking “great thoughts” in apparently disembodied and non-domestic spaces. Or in other words reception itself is a gendered phenomenon, making men “great” in ways made familiar by repetition, such as being “great” by thinking. This genre-determined writing practice operates not only at the expense of women, whose elevation to this “great” status takes considerable effort to achieve, given the gendered character of the genre, but because of genre-power, woman-as-great-thinker, or indeed thinker at all, becomes – apart from feminist histories and biographies – almost unthinkable. This discursive politics of marginalizing women as thinking subjects has the further effect, particularly in the case of Marx and Engels, of marginalizing day-to-day activist practice, conducted – as we will see – in gendered partnerships, which are rendered invisible not simply by intellectual biographers, but by the genre itself.

Bio-data

Here is a rather telegraphic *compte rendu* of received truths about the four women, referenced from recent “humanizing” biographies of the two “great men.” After this brief exercise in basic bio-data, I analyse the marginalizing strategies that intellectual biographies deploy. Note that my approach also refuses the commonplace view that bio-data is simply factual when drawn from reliable documentation, and that similar basics of a life can be taken for granted as circumstantial givens. Actually they are derived from presumptions about what is and isn’t of note about a person, and are therefore unselfconscious constructions of personhood as we understand it (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2013, 287-91).

Jenny Marx *née* von Westphalen (1814-1881): Karl’s childhood sweetheart through a long engagement; a 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,” yet a relentlessly domestic shadow of Marx’s genius and obsessions; predeceased her husband by a few months; generally regarded as a tragic figure battling debt, disease, infant death and an unfaithful husband (but see below under Helene Demuth) (Wheen 2000 [1999], *passim*).

Helene Demuth “Lenchen” (1820-1890): servant girl from Jenny and Karl’s hometown of Trier in Rhenish Prussia; brought by Jenny to Brussels in 1845 to help her with small children, and, as often happened in such situations, 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 Lydia Burns known as “Mrs Lizzie” (see below); after the archival discovery in 1962 of a typewritten copy of the hitherto unknown “Freyburger letter” of 1898, she becomes a major

character in the Marx/Engels biographical register, owing to her pregnancy and delivery in 1851 of an illegitimate son Henry Frederick Lewis Demuth; in the letter Louise Freyburger (former wife of the socialist politician Karl Kautsky and after “Lenchen’s” death yet another Engels housekeeper, d. 1950) alleges – in prose of high Victorian deathbed melodrama – that Marx was the father of “Freddy” (d. 1929), and thus an unfaithful husband and source of grief and shame (Wheen 2000, *passim*; for a contrary view, see Carver 2005).

Mary Burns (1821-1863): Engels’s sometime companion in Manchester and presumed mistress; a mill girl of Irish origin, said to be uneducated and apparently barely literate; credited by Engels with guiding him through the industrial slums; subject of his grief at her early death, occasioning a much noted remonstrance in correspondence to Marx about the latter’s and Jenny’s apparent indifference to his loss; 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 (Hunt 2009, *passim*).

Lydia Burns (1827-1878): Mary’s sister and successor as Engels’s housekeeper/presumed mistress/companion, having lived with the pair for some years; rather more recorded in correspondence than Mary, and apparently in a rather more respectable status, since the Marxes in their late years made seaside excursions with the unmarried couple; occasionally mentioned as Engels’s wife, though usually 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 among his impeccably bourgeois family back in Germany; fondly remembered by Marx’s teenage daughter Eleanor, who recounted

champagne-drinking with her on a hot afternoon “without stays”; also apparently barely literate (Hunt 2009, *passim*).

Centering Marginalization

How does this marginalization work? A survey and analysis of the Marx/Engels biographical tradition will give us some clues and insights, which may also be of use in reconsidering other “great men.” Taking the oldest biography first – Mehring (1951 [1918]) – we can see that the four women are treated in a bio-data manner, with extreme brevity, and only in relation to “humanizing” the two male subjects. From the outset it is a given that any biography of Marx would necessarily have to include a fulsome account of his advertized partnership with Engels in which the personal and the political are assumed to be merged in ways that reinforce “great man” narratives.

Mehring considers Jenny, in his first mention, as “future wife” (56); then in relation to a repetition of certain remarks (not about her) by Engels that he made “at the grave of Frau Marx” (86); in the tale of the Marxes joint arrest in Brussels, briefly noting her incarceration “in the company of common prostitutes” (152); in correspondence when the biographer paraphrases Marx, writing that “his wife would follow him” into exile in England and noting that “Black care accompanied him on his third exile” (190); from Jenny’s correspondence in praising the “calm, clear and collected strength of his [Marx’s] character,” leaving the reader to conclude that the dispatch of manuscripts in 1850 to Hamburg for a *Review* was wholly his and Engels’s logistical effort – unlikely, as we will see later (192); in recording the birth of the Marxes’ fourth child, Mehring (in English translation) quotes “its mother” on the child’s and Jenny’s tribulations (210). There are further brief notes on similar family troubles (211), including quotations from “the diary of Frau Marx” regarding another infant death (217).

Light-heartedness makes an entry in an anecdote, recounted from the Marx-Engels correspondence, that “Frau Marx” had “concealed a whole budget of debts,” said by Marx to be out of misplaced consideration for Engels, which Marx had eventually to confess to his benefactor. This was in one of his routine requests for financial assistance and routine promises – in this case including a remark on “the folly of women” – about which Engels (in Mehring’s words) was “good-humoured” (234-35). Child-death recurs under the heading “Family and Friends” (246-47), and in the succeeding pages of the biography Jenny serves the family well by inheriting enough money (from two sources) to enable them all to move (in Jenny’s words) to “a really princely home” and to recover “with delight” her previously pawned “Scottish damask napkins” (248-49). In further passages “Frau Marx” functions as a witness to, rather than participant in, Karl’s (apparently) sole labours as a “great thinker” (255). Then in a remarkable passage noting Jenny’s direct logistical participation in this work – “making fair copy of the whole voluminous manuscript [of the polemical pamphlet *Herr Vogt* (1860)] for the printer” – Mehring frames this logistical activity as “a breakdown” for Jenny resulting in smallpox, which was devastating (297).

Mehring’s follow-up is lengthy quotation attesting to the “natural vitality” characteristically shown by “Jenny Marx” as she recounts, in a “charming letter,” items of news concerning the Marx children to a female friend. Mehring’s view of Jenny then refers her good qualities back to his biographical subject, saying that she “possessed [them] in her own way no less than did her husband” (298-299). Jenny’s sole appearance as an activist, or indeed political consciousness, in her own right comes when Mehring quotes from her letter to the editor of *Der Verbote* (concerning the Second [Lausanne] Congress of the [First Socialist] International]), but noting that “Marx consoled himself in a similar fashion” (389), so as to keep the biographical narrative clearly focused. Jenny makes one more appearance

as major source on family ups-and-downs (506), and then declines, in a section headed “Twilight”. In conclusion she is honoured at her interment by Engels (526-28).

D.B. Riazanov’s *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (1973 {1927}) originated the brief but thoroughly intellectualized tradition of biographizing Marx, opening his book in an unmistakable way: “In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels we have two individuals who have greatly influenced human thought. The personality of Engels recedes somewhat into the background as compared to Marx” (13). Moving swiftly through two chapters of bio-data and early life (for both men), and omitting any account of Marx’s long engagement and eventual marriage in 1843, Riazanov arrives at 1844 when “Marx formulated for the first time the basic principles of his future philosophy” (43). Rather unsurprisingly from this “great man” and “great thinker” framing, none of the four women occurs in his text. By contrast, and adverting to “family” matters, Marx’s father Heinrich gets two pages (33-34), and through this patriarchal framing Riazanov tells us how we should understand Karl’s formative years, and – of concern to some readers, evidently – his relationship to Judaism. Moreover this woman-free framing helps to secure Riazanov’s presentation of Marx and his “philosophy” as serious and scientific over against the “present absence” of its defining opposite: a domestic zone where such things would not be conceived or understood.

The biography, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, by Boris Nicolaievsky and Otto Maenchen-Helfen (1973 [1933]), awards Jenny a complete though very short chapter, covering Karl’s engagement and marriage (23-30). She subsequently figures as a source of information about his relations with her various relatives, who crop up in his life both positively (sources of money) and threateningly (secret police activity) (70, 140). Unusually the joint biographers quote Jenny at length in a letter detailing the persecution of the couple in England by the Prussian police (173), though – as we will see later – this is an

example of an opportunity missed. The account is framed as female-to-female, through which the spaces and events involved are in that way presented as merely domestic/private, though providing *inter alia* information about “public” men, what they do, and what happens to them. Moreover Jenny is credited with participating in what were crucial activities at the time, but not credited as a crucial actor by the biographers, who consider such feminized matters a parenthetical aside. They spend no time considering the scale and difficulty of some of the actions involved, for example: “The money Marx brought with him [to London in 1849] – his wife had sold the furniture in Cologne and she had pawned the silver in France – quickly vanished” (251).

Isaiah Berlin’s (2013 [1939]) hugely influential but relatively brief *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (in the original title), authored by a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, had a specially intellectual cachet. It was indeed the first popular work for English-language readers to take a studiously sympathetic view of Marx as an intellectual, rather than an account presenting him in overtly political terms. Jenny features very briefly, and only in relation to Karl’s courtship poetry (recently collected and published at the time of writing), his marriage and family poverty (humanizing detail but obviously a distraction from “great” thoughts), children’s illnesses and her own death prior to his (22 n. 31, 73, 180, 183, 262).

Succeeding Berlin’s little book was a more substantial “door-stop” biography of some 500 pages, written by David McLellan, whose Oxford D.Phil. dissertation was supervised by Berlin. This was *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (1987 [1973]), until very recently the definitive intellectual biography in English (and much translated). This work follows the genre outlined above in terms of birth-to-death chronology, gendered hierarchies of significance, and domestic/private exclusions. It offers great detail in places, yet the narrative provides further evidence of the kinds of *incuriosity* required of

biographers in order to secure the genre-focus on a “great man” using his “great” mind to think “great thoughts.”

In McLellan’s biography Jenny’s letters of 1844 from Trier – where she recounts various money-related encounters – are a narrative prelude to a characteristically “was-to” moment: “She [Jenny] returned to Paris in September 1844 with the wet-nurse and her [*sic* – their?] four-tooth baby to find that Marx had just formed the most important friendship of his life – that with Friedrich Engels” (130-131). Jenny’s financial backing during the revolutionary events of 1848 for Marx’s revived newspaper seems, in McLellan’s narrative, quite as unremarkable as Marx’s own contribution (whatever the legal circumstances of married women’s property at the time): “Marx had to contribute yet more of his own and Jenny’s money to get the paper restarted and it became legally his own property” (208). Substantial quotations from Jenny’s letters to their male political collaborators, e.g. Joseph Weydemeyer, on non-wifely and decidedly activist matters do not prompt any biographical opening-up to gendered partnerships as a material and spatial activity. Rather they are content with the rather formulaic encomiums pronounced by Engels and others on the general character of her relationship to him (237). Nor does McLellan follow up on Jenny’s own quite detailed account of how this collective activism actually worked in spatial and material terms, as we learn from her letter to a male correspondent in October 1852: “A whole office has been established in our house. Two or three do the writing, others run errands, others scrape together pennies so that the writers can continue to exist ... In the middle of it all my three faithful children sing and pipe ... Some business!” (251).

Two further “door-stop” intellectual biographies have emerged in the last decade, both catching a wave of post-financial-crash interest in Marx, though both clearly the result of many years work. Given the far-greater resources and greater availability of archival

materials, both have more Jenny-Marx-material to quote from, but both display the incuriosity about that material that is necessary in order to secure the “great thinker” in genre-terms. Jonathan Sperber’s (2013) *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* frames his narrative in an impeccably malestream rank-ordering: “... this book will place his [Karl’s] private life and political actions in their nineteenth-century context. As such, it will be a portrait, not just of Marx but of the many people surrounding him. Two of these individuals are an obvious choice: Marx’s loyal friend, political associate, intellectual collaborator, and chief disciple, Friedrich Engels, and his wife and lifelong love, Jenny von Westphalen” (xvi).

Sperber’s “spin” on Jenny’s letters, written from Trier in 1844, improves on McLellan’s, by surmising her relief on finding her husband safely absorbed in a bromantic, lifelong relationship: “Jenny had some anxieties about leaving her husband alone in a city [Paris] that had a well-developed reputation for sexual licentiousness, but there was no need for her to worry. In her absence Karl continued his political activities, read economists voraciously, and developed his communist ideas. His one important personal encounter was not with a chorus girl but with Friedrich Engels” (134-35). Sperber breezes through the 1848 arrest episode in Brussels, when Jenny went to get her husband out of jail, but then found herself incarcerated as well. Sperber’s telling of the tale thus offers an interesting but overlooked indication that the Belgian police – as opposed to intellectual biographers – had some grasp of gendered political partnerships. Sperber notes that the family’s belongings – “a total of 405 kilos” – only “caught up with them eight months later, after a lengthy bureaucratic odyssey,” which he leaves unexamined. I wonder who unravelled all these complications?

Incuriously patronizing, Sperber catches Jenny in correspondence “expressing her husband’s views [but] in starker and less sophisticated form” (375). And something goes

unobserved – against the evidence of Jenny’s correspondence about politics with (male) co-activists – in this astonishing passage: “In the 1850s and 1860s, when Marx listed members of his party [*sic*] and he or Jenny recounted their friends, the two groups were composed of the same people. Jenny did have non-political friends, but Marx did not ...” (477). Here we have a clear summary that a gendered political partnership was operating, but Sperber contrasts Jenny’s involvement irrelevantly with Marx’s through a “non-political” set of unnamed persons. Their role in this narrative is to remove her in the reader’s mind from the partnered situation that the biographer has inadvertently declared.

The volume closes, as it began, with Marx foremost in relation to his “significant others,” rank-ordered in the way that intellectual biography requires: “He [Marx] attended the [International Working Men’s Association] Congress [in 1870 in The Hague] in person ... Engels accompanied him, as did Jenny, who attended the sessions” (512).

The most recent and by far the longest (at 750 pages) intellectual biography of Marx is Gareth Stedman Jones’s (2016) *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, in which he credits Jenny at the outset with firm opinions and a strong-minded character. He maintains this characterization throughout, yet remains immune to the evidence that he inadvertently produces for a spatial and material gendered political partnership. Though written some forty years after the events recounted, Stefan Born’s reminiscences of his acquaintance with the Marxes is quoted at length by Stedman Jones as a characterful vignette, rather than an interesting clue as to what might be discovered or surmised by using a different “lens”: “He [Born] was particularly impressed by Jenny, commenting, ‘throughout her life she took the most intense interest in everything that concerned and occupied her husband ...’” (223). Leaving aside Born’s assignment of Jenny’s concerns and occupations to her husband, Stedman Jones sees no reason to explore how this testimony to an evident meeting of the

minds would actually have operated in spatial and material ways, other than in sexualized terms of marital fidelity/infidelity (324).

Possibly the most striking thing that Jenny actually does in Stedman Jones's biography, in the sense of presenting an angle not much noticed elsewhere, is to be jealous of the bromantic Engels, even though recounted in third-party memoirs (and evidently in fourth-hand terms) which are fulsomely supported by the biographer: "... she [Mrs Marx] resented and deplored his [Engels's] influence over his great friend [Karl]. She spoke of him [Engels] to my wife more than once as Marx's 'evil genius' ..." (565). Though framed by a man as woman-to-woman remarks, and therefore of subordinate importance to the "public" truths of the time concerning the Marx-Engels relationship, perhaps there is a clue here to a gendered political partnership that could not then achieve public notice. As we have learned, such a framing doesn't easily emerge when biographers "mine" the historical records, not because the raw material isn't there, but – because of genre-necessity – biographers aren't actually looking for it.

Marx make-over

By contrast with the above masculinized genre, Mary Gabriel's (2011) recent study of the Marxes' marriage is much more interesting. Gabriel has indeed highlighted and developed some historical details, and made good use of memoir material and third-party correspondence that others have overlooked or abbreviated. 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 usually domestic with the importantly world-historical.

Gabriel's book inverts the usual format of the "great man" intellectual biography, not simply because it has a woman as the major subject, because the subject is apparently non-intellectual, or at least did not write much, and then not on any subjects outside her own life experience. The chronological spine of her book is thus chapterized in wholly political/geographical terms, rather than mostly chapterized per "great work," as is conventional in intellectual biography. By contrast Gabriel's focus on Jenny and her life-experience has the effect of filling over 500 pages with quotidian detail: where and how the Marxes were living and travelling, 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 gossip who-thought-what-of-whom-and-why.

Gabriel's attention to these details – perhaps feminist inspired – thus begins to alter what we already think we know from intellectual biographies. In that genre, for example, the flights of escape endured by the Marx family between 1845 and 1849 – from Paris to Brussels, back to Paris and then on to Cologne, and back to Paris again, and on to London – all merit a mention, including the 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 familiar trek from juvenilia and early works through to later writings and manuscripts. Moreover Marx's and Engels's real-life revolutionary comrades, who were in and around these quotidian upheavals, have not made it to "greatness" and so figure only as minor characters. This would not have been Jenny's – or Karl's – view of things at the time, whereas Marx's intellectualized, and therefore somewhat de-politicized encounters with other "great thinkers," such as Hegel, Feuerbach, Smith and Ricardo etc., are in genre terms the center of interest, and Engels's similarly, though rather less so.

However, those apparently rarefied philosophical encounters took place at the time as *political* encounters in which ideas were mobilized. Marx's and Engels's sometime confrères were not then already organized as associates of the "great man" Marx as the major character, and indeed many would have scoffed at the idea that he was "major" at all. But in intellectual biography he has to be, and so the genre performs this posthumous construction of an identity that will do the job. Anyway, the real-life revolutions of 1848-1849 are well known in the histories to have "failed," even if revisionists sometimes abjure such summary judgments. Consequently fellow activists become small-timers in forgotten events, providing effective contrast with Marx remembered as a "great thinker," partnered in various important senses by Engels alone.

By adopting a Jenny-centered perspective, Gabriel's chronological, diary-like chapters begin to do something different. The point of view has shifted, and not just because it is Jenny's view of Marx. Rather we get a view of his associates and the on-going political projects conducted collectively by women and men, as we see from correspondence and memoir. What has happened is that what were in conventional biographies briefly recounted and supposedly uninteresting events and episodes suddenly come to life and occupy much more narrative time and page-print 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 "wolves"), Herwegh, Freiligrath and numerous others of the '48ers and later acquaintances along the way – all become real characters, worthy of attention, since they are significant in Jenny's life. We do not know, in most cases, the exact significance to Jenny of any of these men – and sometimes their female "partners" – at various times. What we

know is that she was there in the space where they were, there was very little space in any of these lodgings, and the spaces were hers as much as Marx's.

Moreover females in this world were not as sequestered in terms of political activism as one might think: Gabriel recounts a number of Jenny-centered episodes in which she was dispatched over land and sea to chase up publishers and backers. Also the girls – the Marxes had three daughters -sometimes accompanied their father to the British Museum, no doubt learning the family trade – international socialism and political agitation – as they went along. Sometimes they also did secretarial tasks for the International Working Men's Association, a major family focus of interest and effort, as we know from intra-family correspondence (Gabriel 2011, 297-329). However, this is not generally archived and published alongside the "great men's" exchanges, or even at all, given the hierarchical disjunction that "greatness" requires. The Marx-Engels correspondence as published is exactly that; third-party correspondence is sometimes represented in scholarly collections, i.e. letters from their correspondents back to the two principals. In the major collections memorializing and iconizing Marx and Engels as "great men," editorially sequestered family letters are relegated to selections, quarantined in appendices, and thus out of the chronological flow of Marx-Engels letters to each other as "great thinkers."

Gabriel's revisioning of Marx thus has some potentially transformative consequences, particularly in relation to what his "great works" were supposed to be about, and more specifically, what they were supposed to be *for*. Within Gabriel's narrative it is less easy to see these as purely cerebral encounters with other "great thinkers," which is the conventional trope of intellectual biography. This is simply because there is so much political maneuvering going on in the foreground, i.e. in the supposedly domestic domain. Home life is thus no longer a convenient and auxiliary space to Marx's real, albeit supposedly quite

abstract activities. Rather it was 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, goal-driven coalitions and fractious male-to-male relationships. 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 does not 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, where silence was enforced, the home-setting actually was a place in which to do politics with what Marx and Engels were writing and thinking.

From Gabriel’s 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. It is through these logistical and emotional circumstances that published works emerged as artifacts, or manuscript pages were preserved and – quite carefully – stored for safe-keeping. What we see in Gabriel’s presentation is a seamless mode of production.

Possibly something of the same would apply to Engels and his activist and writerly arrangements, but we don’t actually know very much about his associates and activities at work or at home or otherwise. After his death, Helene Demuth, and the surviving Marx daughters, Laura and Eleanor, all had something to do with the preservation of his papers, along with Marx’s, over which Engels had acted as literary executor. Some digging through Engels’s correspondence might be useful here, not just to find out what he thought, but to find out who was dropping in when he was alive. The main intellectual biographies – Mayer (1936 [1920/1933]), Henderson (1976), Carver (1989) – do not take up this challenge. There

are some brief hints from Gabriel, though, that the Engels household, as run by “Mrs Lizzie,” was a safe house for Irish nationalists (2011, 316 and n. 21). Engels, rather more than Marx, was inclined to excoriate “bourgeois” sexual hypocrisy in print, and to delve analytically into the politics of heterosexuality, past, present and future. Possibly his associations with the Burns sisters played a part in his motivations, though if so, he didn’t record it.

However, there is a serious issue with social class arising here. Demuth and the two Burns sisters were at best quite poorly educated and so apparently did not, or could not, generate correspondence that could have been preserved. In any case, their lack of education – along with the lack of property or of access to propertied relations and friends – constituted their class difference. The social exclusion of Mary Burns from the activist spaces and political practices undertaken by the Marxes was ambiguously structured, both within conventional world wherein unmarried couples were shunned, and within the unconventional world wherein irregular associations were openly conducted (Carver 1989, 150-51). Lydia Burns in later life ascended to an honorary “Mrs” in public companionship and (limited) social reception, but as “Lizzie” (Carver, 1989, 158-159). “Lenchen” was sometimes noticed in correspondence, principally after the Marx household was broken up and sorted out (“awful lot of dusting required,” Engels wrote), though a moment of quoted speech is unusual. Writing to Laura in 1883 Engels said that he had found among Marx’s papers “a whole lot of mss, our common work, of before 1848 ... There is one I shall read to you ... you will crack your sides with laughing. I read it to Nim [“Lenchen”] ... [who] said: ‘Now I know why you two laughed at night in Brussels at that time so that no one could sleep in the building’” (Engels to Laura Lafargue, 2 June 1883, in Marx and Engels 1995, 29, 31).<7>

But like the Burns sisters, and for the same reasons, “Lenchen’s” major moment in the class-determined circumstances – through which significance is attributed or denied to a human individual – arose at her death. At that juncture, suitable condolences and encomiums could be placed on record, as they would not have been if the subject were alive, but necessarily maintained in a lower order of regard as an intellect. *The People’s Press* published an obituary for her, quoting Engels’s funerary address in which he had declared that “Marx took counsel ... not only in difficult and intricate party matters, but even in respect of his economical writings,” information for which no other record survives. Engels’s tribute was generally more in line with the genre conventions of non-intellectual biography and encomiums on the death of servants: “what work I have been able to do since the death of Marx has been largely due to the sunshine and support of her presence in the house” (Marx and Engels 1990, 529).

Conclusions

Intellectual biography is a masculinized genre against which feminist-inspired writers struggle with difficulty. This is not simply because the genre achieves its ready familiarity, and thus an identification with knowledge-production as such, because it excludes women as important subjects and women-centered activities as domestic and “private,” and thus unimportant. Reconsidering the character of already-important activities by reconsidering the public/private distinction in a spatial way not only includes women in supporting roles, oftentimes cast as emotional and family-related, but reconfigures the notion of writing activities as oftentimes social in a mixed-gendered mode. Moreover these activities are spatial and material in essential ways that are usually overlooked or downgraded.

In the circumstances of nineteenth-century, clandestine and émigré socialist/communist political activism, considered above, this includes public spaces that are

in twentieth-century terms domestic and “private,” such as lodging-house rooms and family-parlours, as well as working practices involving long-hand correspondence, “fair copy” preparation, unrecorded research, translating, proof-reading, financial planning and record-keeping, even parcel-wrapping, couriering and collection. Or to put it another way, men later constructed and understood as “great” only achieved such status, as Marx and Engels did, in and through spatial settings and material activities where women were essential to their political activism, since without logistical support the activism would not have activated.

Notes

1. Brennan and Pateman 1979, 196 n. 53, quoting Kant’s “mere auxiliaries to the commonwealth.”
2. The apparent exceptions – namely studies of Marx as a political activist – prove the rule, in that they are not framed as “intellectual biographies,” but rather as necessary supplementation to “great thoughts”; see for example Gilbert 1981 for a particularly astute exemplar, as is Holmes 2014 from a feminist perspective. Holmes, however, focuses on Eleanor Marx, making a splendid case for her influence as an activist, but – lacking “great works” identified with its subject – the biography is not that of an intellectual with “great thoughts”, as has been the case with Marx.
3. 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.
4. 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 n.d.).

5. See McCrea 2015 for a novelization of Engels's "love interest" and domestic relationship with "Mrs Lizzie." Given the feminist framing of her work, Holmes 2014 presents the Burns sisters and "Lenchen" more sympathetically than in the conventional intellectual biographies of the "great men," though again we learn nothing that hasn't already been presented from the very limited archival materials.
6. Iconization has a political upside, in that it ensures a widespread interest in "great thoughts," though the downside is the erasure (solemn nods to activism notwithstanding) of the material and spatial activities through which – in the case of Marx and Engels – their thinking was actually generated and disseminated. Of course activists can be iconized or demonized for their efforts, but then interpreters will struggle to make them into intellectuals whose thoughts and works are genuinely the equal of already-known "great thinkers" – Lenin and Stalin are cases in point.
7. From Engels's description the manuscripts are presumed to be among those of 1845-1846 edited into a "book" under the title *The German Ideology* by D.B. Riazanov in the 1920s; see Carver and Blank, 2014, 112; in quoting "Lenchen" Engels writes in German in an otherwise English-language letter.

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