



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

### Podcast Transcript: Tristram Hunt on the revolutionary life of Engels

**Duration:** 0:12:07

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Female 1: Welcome, this is a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer: I am here at the British Library to talk to Tristram Hunt, academic, writer, researcher, broadcaster, to talk about his new book 'The Frock-coated Communist- the revolutionary life of Fredrich Engels.'

Tristram Hunt, firstly thank you very much for giving up some of your I know very busy time to talk to us and secondly congratulations on your book I enjoyed it very much and it richly deserves the praise its received.

I suppose the first challenge about writing a book on Fredrich Engels is that one has to wrest him away from the huge shadow cast by Karl Marx, was that part of the attraction of the challenge?

Respondent: Yes I think the attraction was first taking him out of the shadow of Karl Marx but then also in a sense taking him out of the shadow of Lenin so reclaiming him in the 19th century and then reclaiming him in the 20th century. And I think it was hopefully a combination of bringing him to life as a man, as an extraordinarily interesting man and passionate man but then also the significance of his ideas beyond the Leninist shadow and actually I think the peculiar relevance of his contribution to Marxism from that time.

Interviewer: And what was that contribution would you say?

Respondent: I think what Engels understood above all was the human costs of unregulated capitalism. He is the one in Manchester, he is the one at the cutting edge of the cotton industry, he is the one with the mills and the factories and he is the one who writes so persuasively all of which Marx then uses in Das Kapital and further of the costs of capitalisms and I'm extraordinarily struck by the similarity in many ways of what's going on in places like China and India today in terms of rapid urbanisation, rapid industrialisation, and the human costs of that, with what Engels is writing about in Manchester in the 1840s and 50s. There are all sorts of other areas of Engels relevance but I think that is the most pressing.

Interviewer: One of the things that maybe strikes us now about Engels is the fact that he was the great PR exponent for Marx in some ways wasn't he?

Respondent: He was absolutely! There was this lovely moment when at last Das Kapital was published, and we have to remember that Engels had given up so much of his own life to secure the publication of this work, and then he goes on to write about ten reviews of it in various journals across Europe each one taking a different side to try to generate some press interest, what they always hated was what they called the "bourgeois conspiracy of silence". You publish these great works and no one takes a blind but of notice and so Engels was absolutely adamant that Marx's genius was properly understood and appreciated.

Interviewer: The title of your book 'The Frock-coated Communist' reflects the traditional view of Engels being a rich capitalist who was happy at the same time to talk about the exploitation of the proletariat and so on, your position I think is that it was much more complex than that wasn't it? He was at ease with that contradiction in a way that we perhaps are not?

Respondent: Absolutely, it is a fascination difference when you discuss this book with audiences the key question is a) how did he treat his own workers

and b) how could he possibly co-align this contradiction between being a very wealthy mill-owner whose money a lot of which goes down to Marx is based upon the taking of the surplus value of the labour of the proletariat. But he was adamant rather like the royal family that he would never apologise or explain that away. The argument was that in a capitalist system you did what you did under the constraints of that but all the time working for the socialist revolution which he did through his work and political activism but also it was necessary for him to be involved in huckstering in 'accursed commerce' as he called it in order for him to support Marx, in order to publish Das Kapital. So this was a sacrifice on his part rather than as it were a conscious contradiction on his part.

Interviewer: I was particularly interested in the account you gave of Engels attempts to give a philosophical basis to Marx theory, to dialectical materialism and so on, his wrestling with Hegel is central to that, there was a lot a stake in that wasn't there?

Respondent: Oh absolutely, the rediscovery of Hegel by Marx and Engels in the 1870s really takes Marxian thinking onward. I think what is also interesting though less understood is the contribution of his time in Manchester to that and the public culture of science in Manchester informing Engels about the Scientific Revolution of the 19th century and how to fit Marxist thought within that scientific revolution. He is you know seeing what is happening in chemistry, seeing what is happening in physics, geology and all sorts of other areas and thinking how do you marry this via the Hegelian dialectic to the scientific revolution and you begin to go on the path toward dialectical materialism.

Interviewer: Presumably while you were researching this book or writing it the banking collapse happened, that must have been an interesting time for your research do you think that Engels has, you mentioned India

and China, do you think he has anything to say to us in the west perhaps or were the conditions very different to what we are facing?

Respondent: I think what we've seen over the last 20 years is this great post-1989 experiment in laissez-faire capitalism, which really reeks of the mid-19th Century in some sense and there is quite a nice periodisation to that and if you have that degree of capitalism then you have the inherent instability in it and the crises within it, and Engels would have seen and enjoyed the collapse and crisis coming and one can imagine the letters between Engels and Marx as there were in 1856 and in the 1860s when you had exactly these kinds of liquidity crises followed by recessions and depressions in the mid-Victorian period but I think his hopes for revolution would have probably been more closely based in the developing nations rather than in the finance cities of Western Europe.

Interviewer: You give an interesting account of Engels in the 1890's and his relationship to the history of British socialism and your view is that he misses the boat or that socialism in this country developed in a way independent of Engels because of his affiliation with Marx and the Marx family and that's an interesting idea.

Respondent: I think you do have this extraordinary irony of Marx and Engels being in Britain, in London, and at a time when the socialism movement is coming alive and having very little effective influence on it, in comparison to their influence in France and Germany and even in Spain and I think there is some raw personal politics going on. Engels support for Edward Aveling as a putative leader of the British Marxist-Socialist cause is a disastrous decision and he does that because of Edward Aveling's relationship with Eleanor Marx and Engels is blinded by his love I think for the Marx family to support Aveling and I mean he has his own sort of personal attractions to him and that really limits his influence as I see it on the broader Labour movement because people don't trust Aveling and they then don't trust Engels decision making if he is backing Aveling so much and so the influence of him

and the people coming to Regents Park Road begins to decline and I think it's an unusual error by Engels but one with, I think, relatively significant consequences.

Interviewer: Underpinning your book is an extraordinary amount of research which you must have done, I mean the collective works of Marx and Engels run to what is it 60 volumes...

Respondent: Well the English edition is 50 volumes but its...

Interviewer: Ok so it's a lot of work there so how did you tackle that?

Respondent: Well you do have to ... In the Marx-Engels collected works, which is the English translation, there are 50 volumes and I would say I read about 30 volumes, 35 volumes of those and then you have the German editions if you have to double check things, the Werke and even the Mega which is the on-going super translation. Trips to Amsterdam to the International Institute of Social History which has a lot of the Marx Engels archives and then also the letters of Kausky and Bernstein and Eleanor Marx and you know the characters round the edges. But then also a trip to Engels birthplace and the municipal archive in Wuppertal and a visit to the city of Engels itself, which was this Soviet city renamed in his honour which is rather a gloomy sad place but there is some interesting archive stuff there. And then Manchester obviously and the People's History Museum in Manchester and the Working Class Movement Library in Salford have a great deal of tertiary evidence of Engels time there mainly thanks to the research of a man called Roy Whitfield who took these wonderful pictures of Engels various houses in Manchester but there was an awful lot of time spent in this institution here at Humanities2 going through the Engels collection as well as the Marx Memorial Library actually as well.

Interviewer: I wonder if we could just change tack slightly, we at the AHRC and many in the Arts and Humanities research community are concerned

about the issue of how research impacts on society in general, you are an academic with a public profile what would be your understanding of that question about the value of research to society in general?

Respondent: I think it's enormously important particularly in terms of where the British economy is now. It's about knowledge, skills, and it's about language, about higher education and all these things are enormously important in terms both of Britain's prosperity and competitive advantage and also cultural wellbeing. If you look at events, I was up in Manchester this week at the Manchester international Festival, the contribution of art and research and humanities to that and the contribution of that to Manchester's own prosperity and wellbeing is profoundly important but one always has to remember that so much of that is the product of learning for learning sake and history for history's sake and if you begin with a rather narrow mechanistic vision of the end product of research you are actually not going to get the sort of golden eggs you want at the end of it I don't think.

Interviewer: You have finished your book on Engels and it is out there receiving praise as I said what next for you, what is your next piece of work?

Respondent: I think what I'm going to do next in terms of a book is that I want to go back in a sense to my early work on Victorian urbanism and look at cities of empire, so the story of British Imperialism through the urban form but to do so I need to go to lots of cities around the world so I might have to put in a large research grant request to the Arts and Humanities Research Council to fund such an excellent endeavour!

Interviewer: Tristram Hunt, thank you very much.

Female 1: That was a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk). Thank you for listening.

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