**Marx`s lieutenant**

BY M A H I R A L I 2020-11-25

IT has become relatively commonplace in the past couple of decades to acknowledge the contemporary relevance of Karl Marx`s critiques of capitalism. Towards the very end of his entertaining biography of Friedrich Engels, Tristram Hunt takes it a step further, citing the comparison made by a Chinese scholar, Ching Kwan Lee, between the horrific working conditions in an 1840s` Manchester cotton mill described by Engels, and the factory experiences of a migrant worker in Shenzen 160 years later.

He then points to the irony `that such unleavened exploitation is actively sanctioned by the Communist Party of China`.

Engels` description comes from The Condition of the Working Class in England, the seminal text he wrote at 24, shortly before he embarked on a bromance that evolved into an unparalleled intellectual double act.

Born 200 years ago this week into a deeply religious German capitalist family, `Freddy` was pushedintothe family trade at16,before he had completed his schooling. A sojourn away from home made it easier to satiate his intellectual thirst, and following a fling with the Young Hegelians in Berlin, he was converted to communism by Moses Hess, a correspondent for the radical Rheinische Zeitung, published in Cologne.

The newspaper`s editor was Marx, just two years older than Engels. They did not hitit of f right away, but Engels contributed thoughtful articles from Manchester, where the family business had a branch. He managed to get himself posted there because England was then seen as Europe`s most advanced capitalist economy, and therefore the likeliest location for a revolution.

When the two of them encountered each other again in Paris in 1844, they found themselves in agreement on everything that mattered, and just four years later they shared a byline on one of the 19th century`s most enduring tracts: Engels is credited with the first draft, while Marx was responsible was the final shape and form of The Communist Manifesto.

Their collaborations continued for the next 40 years and, in fact, beyond Marx`s demise in 1883. It was Engels who published the second and third volumes of the Marxian magnum opus Das Kapitalhe alone was able to decipher his comrade`s scribbles.

Marx`s notes also provided the step ladder for Engels` seminal work The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.

Engels was consistently modest about his contributions to Marxist doctrine. He declared in 1884: `All my life I have done what I was cut out for namely to play second fiddle and I think I have done quite well in that capacity. And I have been happy to have had such a wonderful first violin as Marx.Many scholars are inclined to think that he underrates his stature. It was, after all, an early Engels tract on political economy that led Marx to sharpen his focus on that aspect of human existence. And there was a reasonably clear division of labour between the two of them af ter Engels, delighted to retire from his capitalist pursuits as a man of independent means, moved from Manchester to London and took on the task of responding to critics so that Marx could concentrate on his scholarship.

He later lamented that if he had realised the quantum of the scribbled mess Marx would leave behind, he would have tried persuading him to devote more time to Das Kapital.

In Manchester, initially as a glorified clerk and then as a partner in the business he inherited from his f ather, Engels lived the life of a bourgeois bon vivant, yet consistently put aside some money (occasionally by pilfering from the company`s petty cash kitty) to assist the perennially destitute Marx and his fam-ily. The assistance increased as he grew richer. Even when he died in 1895, Engels left much of his remaining fortune to Marx`s daughters.

By then he was seen as the grand old sage of European socialism, particularly influential in guiding the course of Germansocial democracy, with Karl Kautsky (later described by Lenin as a `renegade`) and Eduard Bernstein (subsequently a leading `revisionist`) among his acolytes.

Engels occasionally has been accused of providing the philosophical basis for some of the depredations of Communist Party rule in the 20th century, but it`s an unfair charge, given the rather benign vision of communism that emerges in his writings. He is also more closely associated than Marx with terms such as `dialectical materialism` and `scientific socialism`.

It`s more fruitful to view him as a complementary intellectual, who ventured farther than Marx into areas such as the natural sciences and military strategy, and left behind a substantial body of work that retains much of its relevance. And while it`s not inaccurate to memorialise him as Marx`s lieutenant, it`s worth remembering that, on account of his military expertise and active participation in the revolutions of 1848, to near and dear ones including the Marx f amily he was af fectionately known as the `General`. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com