

The Socialist Project for Gender (In)Equality: A Critical Discussion

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For most of nineteenth-century socialists, whose writings are examined in the scope of this paper, women's equality with men was understood mainly in terms of their equal participation in the working collective. However, this concept of equality left unexamined the sexual division of labor by which men are central to production and women are central to reproduction. In the process of change towards a new socialist society, women were given the additional role of workers, but the bases of the unequal gender order were never contested.

Introduction

Marxist socialist theory and later on state socialist ideology pretended to establish women's equality with men. The key of this claim was that women would participate equally with men in productive labor. Additional promises or ideological claims were made about women's equality with men in the sphere of reproduction. Early socialist writings spoke about the withering away of the family (as the locus of women's oppression), and the establishment of unconstrained relations among sexes, based on free love. This radical idea did not pervade the state socialist

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ideology, but nevertheless attempts were made to change the family in state socialist legislation and it was widely proclaimed that the family would be based on women's equality with men.

The Marxist socialist theory of women's equality never clearly defined gender relations in the future socialist society. The socialists were actually not preoccupied with *gender* equality. They saw women's subordination as one of the aspects of capitalist exploitation, and they did not recognize that men (also) oppressed women.¹ However, they finally developed a theory of women's liberation, which should be understood as a theory of women's liberation from capital with an added, but not fully developed promise of equality between the sexes. The gender order that the theory suggested was still based on problematic assumptions leading to gender inequalities. Women were offered participation in the sphere of production, but at the same time it was assumed that they would still have to fulfill their (alleged) reproductive duties, with the *help* of the socialist community. As Hilda Scott puts it, "the theory was not finished" (Scott, 1976, pp.213-214).

Socialist writings on 'the woman question'

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a two fold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, shelter, and the tools necessary for that production; on the other hand, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.

(Engels, 1884).

Socialists were very critical of their contemporary societies because of the position in which women were placed. The 'woman question' constantly accompanied the 'social question'² and they both represented the two main themes of the socialist project of restructuring the societies of the late nineteenth century.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critical assessment of the socialist project for women's emancipation. I will focus on the underlying idea of all prominent socialist writings that the transformation of the family would liberate women from the oppression they experienced both in capitalist and in pre-capitalist societies. My critical discussion here aims to identify the flaws of the Marxist/ socialist theoretical perspective on women's emancipation, which assumed that women's participation in the labor force and the

socialization of childcare and household activities were sufficient requisites for achieving women's full equality with men. I will show that such a perspective is flawed with a class-biased interpretation of the social conditions that shape women's lives. In various degrees, all socialist authors failed to recognize the role that gender played in structuring the social relations between men and women in the capitalist societies that they criticized, or in the future socialist societies that they upheld.

My discussion of the theoretical socialist project for women's emancipation focuses on the works of August Bebel's *Women Under Socialism* (1879), Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Aleksandra Kollontai's views on love and Lenin's *On the Emancipation of Women*.³ My purpose is to identify the theoretical model of the transformation of the family contained in the socialist project and to critically assess its impact on the status of women. My argument is that in offering a view on the transformation of relations between the sexes, the early socialists left unchallenged men and women's participation in the sphere of reproduction. The assumption that women are primarily responsible for reproduction (in the sense of childbearing and child rearing) led to difficulties in drawing the line between the public and the private. Finally, due to the intricacies of the tension between women's

participation in social/ working life and their assumed reproductive responsibilities, the socialist project offered a male biased account of reshaping the public/ private division.

My critique is greatly informed by the socialist feminist rethinking of Marxism and early socialism. These critiques gained momentum in 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, within the theoretical debates of the Second Wave feminist movement in the United States and Western Europe. Socialist feminists like Heidi Hartmann, Alison Jaggar, Juliet Mitchell, Sandra Harding or Iris Young revised the premises of early socialism, often formulating completely new interpretations. They argued that there was a gender gap in the socialist analysis of women's condition, which obscured the specific oppression that resulted from women's centrality in reproduction, as well as from the patriarchal relations that structured social life.

Marx and Engels, August Bebel and even socialist women like Clara Zetkin or Lily Braun were all too ready to assume that women's oppression will end once they would gain equal participation in the working collective of the future socialist society. However gender sensitive their writings prove (and I will make this point clear in my argument below), socialist authors failed to challenge the patriarchal assumptions that defined the dichotomy between productive and reproductive activities, and women' and

men's differential participation in both spheres. Work itself was assumed to be primarily linked with production and, consequently, reproductive *work* was never given equal status with productive work. Furthermore, the socialist project for women's emancipation still assumed that women were central in reproduction.

Socialists, mainly following Engels, recognized the existence of both productive and reproductive relations in the organization of social life. They placed however the emphasis on productive relations, and the arguments that they developed are fraught with economic determinism. Socialism more or less viewed the mode of production as the determining factor in organizing social life. To use Engels' terminology, socialist thinking asserted that the mode of production directly shaped the organization of reproduction.⁴ Therefore the latter was to be transformed by a mere replacement of capitalist relations of production with socialist ones. Socialist authors argued that the establishment of the socialist mode of production would abolish all the oppressive features of the capitalist society vis-à-vis women: economic dependence, home seclusion, and sexual and emotional exploitation. They predicated this view on the assumption that women's subordination to men was a result of class exploitation, a view that remains blind to gender inequalities.

To foster the gender blindness of the socialist thinking even further, economic determinism becomes entangled with patriarchal assumptions about the 'natural' roles of men and women. Having conflated the spheres of reproduction and production, socialists maintained that equality between men and women *meant* the equal participation of women and men in the working collective. The argument that the mode of production determined the relations of reproduction might have induced the optimistic belief that indeed women's integration in the workforce will bring full equality in the relations between the sexes. However, one has to give up such optimism, when encountering more explicit articulations of the socialist vision of the relations between sexes. With the exception of Aleksandra Kollontai, all socialists believed that relations between the sexes were regulated by nature, and that gender differences in reproduction were natural. It was only the capitalist economic relations, based on private property, which hindered the 'natural' development of relations between men and women. In turn, they promised that the future socialist society would give space to the natural realization of relations between the sexes, by abolishing private property. It appears evident that such a perspective, far from giving arguments in favor of a more egalitarian development of reproductive rela-

tions, actually preserves segregation according to men and women's natural roles.

I would like the reader to keep in mind the importance of this theoretical gap. The socialist project failed to address the question: *how will women achieve equality with men in the sphere of reproductive relations (whether belonging to the private or to the public space)?* They did not debate on this matter, because they contended that equality between men and women would develop naturally, once capitalist exploitation was abolished. This claim is still loaded with assumptions about men and women's natural roles.

Socialists asserted that, in order for the transformation of societies to take place, women had to be freed for participation in social life, more specifically in working life. Socialist authors seem to agree that the place women had to be liberated from was the family. Marx and Engels, August Bebel, Clara Zetkin or Lily Braun clearly stated that family, as it appeared in the capitalist, bourgeois society was the locus of women's oppression. Marx and Engels argued that "women's oppression originated in the natural or sexual division of labor within the family" (Goldman, 1993, p.46).

Given this general understanding that the monogamous, bourgeois family, based on capitalist relations of property was the single most important factor, which determined the subordi-

nated position of women, socialists engaged in an extensive discussion about the need to transform the family. Their perspective on the transformation of the family made no concessions to the traditional arrangements. As Boxer and Quataert clearly put it: "socialism required dissolution of the family" (1978, p.16).

Socialists made three main claims about the ways in which the family was going to be transformed in the future socialist society. These claims also entailed reasons why they believed such a transformation was going to bring women's full equality with men. I will outline below these claims, and then I will critically discuss them in the context of several socialist writings to show that they do not raise up to their promise of full gender equality.

The first claim was that the transformation of the oppressive, bourgeois family required women's participation in labor. Women's participation in labor was considered key to their emancipation, as it offered them the possibility of economic independence (Bebel, Kollontai, Lenin). A crucial point needs to be added to this claim. Women's integration into the labor force was not going to offer them freedom and equality as long as capitalist economic relations were kept in place. Here, the demands for women's emancipation met with the demands for worker's emancipation and, according to socialist thinking, they both pointed to the need to

end class relations of exploitation, by abolishing private property.

The second claim that socialist authors made about the transformation of the family was the need to socialize childcare and domestic work. The general vision was that of a gradual shift from an individual, autarchic family to communal living arrangements. August Bebel stated that the transformation of the social conditions had one fundamental prerequisite, the end of private property, which would in turn lead to the socialization of the community (Bebel, 1976, p.180). In a passage of *Das Kapital*, Marx spoke about a “higher form of the family” (Evans, 1987, p.94), which could probably be identified with the working collective. Lily Braun argued, like Bebel and Marx, that the family would give way in the future socialist society to communal forms of social organization. Nadezhda Krupskaya, in *The Woman Worker*, looked forward to a socialist future when children would be cared for in communal institutions (Evans, 1987, p.94). Aleksandra Kollontai, by far the most radical advocate of feminist ideas within the socialist movement, thought that the family would be replaced with the commune (“Communism and Family”, cited in Zhuravskaya, 1998, p.55).

Thirdly, the transformation of the family also posed the question of changing relations between sexes. The configuration of relations between sexes was a point of contention among so-

cialist writers. Some of them advocated for free love, others aimed to largely preserve a more traditional (i.e. monogamous) type of relations between men and women, albeit one based on love and not on economic constraints. Both of these perspectives are in my opinion male biased, as I will show below, in a more detailed discussion. The free love model does not take into consideration the social expectations that assign women the responsibility of taking care of children. Therefore, men and women are placed in unequal positions to enter and develop free love relations. On the other hand, the advocates of monogamy fail to recognize that love, as it is socially constructed, requires disproportionate emotional investment from women, as compared to men (a point which Aleksandra Kollontai made very clear).

I will critically discuss below some of the prominent articulations of the perspective that I outlined above.

August Bebel: Women and Socialism

August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* was published first in 1879, and it achieved an uncontested influence within the socialist movement, particularly in debates around ‘the woman question’. The book was translated into numerous languages and reissued in more than fifty

editions in Germany alone (Goldman, 1993, p.36). Bebel's analysis of women's oppression greatly influenced the thinking of socialist women like Clara Zetkin and Aleksandra Kollontai, as it was the first attempt to move away from "proletarian antifeminism" (Goldman, 1993, p.36), and to theorize women's position in the future socialist society.

I will show in what follows that August Bebel's analysis contains a discussion of women's sexual subordination to men that could overcome the much-criticized economic determinism of socialist theory. My defense of August Bebel's perspective is nevertheless limited. The fate of his argument is similar to that of Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Having acknowledged the specific, sexual subordination of women, Bebel fails to take it into account in his discussion of the future socialist society. As all the other socialist writers, he silences the issue of women's sexual emancipation and gives voice to their social and economic liberation, through equal participation with men, in the working collective.

In *Women and Socialism*, the most extensive discussion of the 'woman question' within the end of nineteenth century socialist movement, Bebel develops a two-fold argument. First of all, he examines women's condition 'in the past and in the present' to show the inequalities and oppression that historically affected women's lives.

Bebel argues that women have always experienced oppression and that "although the forms of [their] oppression have varied, the oppression has always remained the same" (Bebel, 1976, p.18). The second part of his analysis offers his vision of a future society⁵ that will end inequalities between men and women.

Bebel traced back the manifestations of women's oppression at the level of legislation, economic relations, and the organization of the family. He argued that legislation was an "exclusive male" practice, which fostered men's "own advantage", and helped them "keep women in a state of tutelage" (Bebel, 1976, p.3). In support of this argument, he allowed extensive space for analyzing the male bias and the male privileges, as they were enshrined in the legislation. First of all, he was critical of those legal provisions that supported men's violence against women, such as those allowing for "moderate chastisement of a wife by her husband" (p. 138). He further criticized the divorce legislation, which did not allow women to break the ties of marriage and forced them to submit to the sexual demands of their husbands (pp.55-56). He also condemned the moral double standard, which allowed husbands to have affairs outside marriage, but prohibited the same behavior for women.

Much more than legislation, Bebel emphasized women's economic dependence on men as one of the determining factors of women's op-

pression. Writing before Engels' analysis of the family, Bebel stated that: "the bourgeois marriage is a consequence of bourgeois property" (p.231), and that "[...] woman owe[s] the inferiority of her position to the peculiarities of her sex, which place her in a situation of economic dependence on man" (p. 43)

The outstanding aspect of Bebel's analysis is, however, his overall argument that the fundamental aspect of women's oppression is their sexual subordination. He described women's condition as "sexual slavery" (p.3). To a contemporary reader such a position hinges on a radical feminist standpoint. "Woman", he writes, "was subject to man in all social relationships, [but] especially so where his sexual needs were concerned" (p.4). Bebel supported his assertion with examples of sexual subordination and sexual abuse of women, epitomized in the practice of prostitution. He exposed prostitution as a pervasive phenomenon, which could be traced in every country, in every religion and in any period of time.

The other pervasive institution of sexual subordination was, according to Bebel, *the bourgeois marriage*. Bebel thought of marriage as (another) form of sexual slavery, in which women were forced to sell themselves as "objects of enjoyment" (p.71). Along with the appropriation of their sexuality, marriage also subjected women to physical and emotional

exploitation within the household, confinement to reproductive roles and pressure to procreate, home seclusion and hindrance of mental development. Bebel condemned men's egotism that appropriates women's emotional labor and expects her to be attentive, smiling, and responsive to his needs, always ready to listen and care about *his* troubles and worries. He saw domestic work as a burden, which was slowly wearing out a woman's "body and mind" (p.68).

Certainly, the link between economic independence and sexual slavery, in Bebel's terms has a class specificity, that is it can only be argued for the propertied, middle and upper-class families of the capitalist society. Bebel proves once again comprehensive in his analysis, when he acknowledges the oppressive nature of the family not only among middle and upper-classes, but also among working-classes. In working-class families, women are the victims of men's alcoholism and violent behavior. However, he argues that these behaviors on the part of men are the result of dire economic conditions and material deprivations. Women's oppression falls back to class exploitation once again and Bebel fails to recognize patriarchy in the relations between working-class men and women. For Bebel, poverty remains the most important factor in shaping the relations among men and women within the working-class families.

As promissory as his analysis of the sexual subordination of women may sound, Bebel gets tangled in the nature *vs.* social dichotomy when explaining the nature of the relations between sexes. As Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, he struggled with the contradictions between “man as a natural and sexual being and man as member of society” (p.85). In *Women and Socialism*, he resorts to both biological and social and economic explanations of women’s condition. For instance, he considers women’s subordination as natural, when he argues that “nature has burdened women alone with the act of generation” (p.91). On the other hand, he argued extensively against the sexual division of labor, which ascribed women the role of housewives and confined them to the walls of home and kitchen. Women’s subordinate status was rooted in the *artificial* sex-segregation of the bourgeois society: “[..] the relationship of the two sexes [...] is an artificial antagonism, a position of master and servant, which keeps both socially apart from their earliest years.” (p.149). Sex-role education was responsible, in Bebel’s view for gender hierarchies: “women are checked as much in their bodily as in their mental development. This repressive system is favored by the strict separation of sexes in social intercourse and at school” (p.71). He also maintained that stereotypes about women’s natural vocation for home, and family, as well as men’s

perception about women’s inferiority prevented women’s advance in the social life.

Bebel advocated equality as the main emancipatory route for women out of their condition of both sexual slavery (p.3) and economic dependence on men (p.43). He supported reforms in view of achieving equality within the bourgeois society, such as the admittance of women to liberal professions and to higher education, on equal terms with men (pp.105-136), and women’s right to vote (pp. 137-152). He argued that the advance of industrialization and the developments in the legislation of capitalist societies had improved the status of women. Bebel considered that the “modern middle-class society contains the germs which a future society only needs to generalize and develop on a large scale to accomplish a vast and radical reform”. Still, he maintained that only the socialist society could offer the material conditions for women to “attain the full development of their being, the normal exercise of all their powers and faculties” (p. 42). Women’s true equality with men could only be achieved in the socialist society and this equality meant for and foremost *equality in work*.

Much as other socialist writers, his concern was with freeing women for participation into the social life, and more specifically into working life. He believed that women’s participation in labor, together with the radical socialist transfor-

mation of the society would bring about the transformation of the family, and women's liberation. Bebel's socialist vision of the transformation of the family (and of the society at large) had one fundamental prerequisite: the end of private property. In his view, the end of property-based relations would lead to the socialization of the community. The (future) socialist community was to be essentially a community of labor: "After society has entered into exclusive possession of all the means of production, the equal duty of all to labor, without distinction of sex, will become the first fundamental law of the Socialistic community" (1976, p.180). Bebel assumed that the socialist working collective would be based on gender equality. In my opinion, this assumption is not supported by his arguments. Abolition of private property in itself does not mean that men and women would become equal workers. Working relations have always been characterized by gender inequalities such as sexual discrimination, which are distinct from class inequalities, and therefore would not end just by abolishing private property and putting an end to the unequal accumulation of capital.

Bebel rightfully understood that productive relations could not be transformed, unless the sphere of reproduction was also restructured. His solution for restructuring reproductive relations was the socialization and mechanization of

domestic work and the socialization of child rearing. Again, these solutions prove insufficient for establishing gender equality in the sphere of reproduction. As much as the abolition of private property does not offer the ground for women and men to become equal workers, the socialization of domestic work and child rearing does not mean that men and women would become equal housekeepers and equal parents. Women's domestic work was to be replaced by central kitchens, central washing establishments, central factories for producing clothes etc. Moreover, he imagined a complete socialization of food production in which "the entire preparation of food will be undertaken by society" and "the private kitchen will disappear" (p.227). In his view, these transformations would "reduce household to the narrowest possible limits, and the widest field [would] be opened for the gratification of social instincts" (p.221). This vision has the merits of recognizing that housekeeping activities are work, even though they are performed privately, and therefore it is a step further from the capitalist definition of work. However, all he does is to change the location of activities that reproduce everyday life (preparing food, washing clothes) from private to public. The very fact that he separates these activities from "productive activities" constitutes a flaw. Joanna Goven (1993) has shown that in state socialism the sphere of paid work was divided between pro-

ductive and reproductive activities. She contains that labor was gendered under state socialism: “Male labor is truly productive, female labor is reproductive” (1993, p.212). This division was hierarchical: reproductive labor did not have the same worth and status as productive labor.⁶ However, her and other scholars (Molyneux, 1981) see this as a result of the industrial bias of state socialist countries. In my opinion, the origins of this division are contained in the gender bias of socialist theory, which, as Bebel’s arguments show, still sees the socialist society divided between men’s productive community and women’s reproductive community.

This division appears forcefully in Bebel’s view on the socialization of child rearing. When examining this view, it appears clear that he not only endeavored to keep the gender segregation of reproductive activities, but he also thought that this segregation was natural. Bebel attributed the task of child rearing to the community. In socialism, Bebel argued, women would no longer have to allocate most of their time to bringing up children, because the community would take care of all the children, whether legitimate children or not (pp. 216-218). The crucial assumption that needs to be unwrapped here is that this community is a community of women. Bebel’s perspective on the socialization of child caring does not challenge women’s centrality in reproduction and the perceptions

about their natural role as mothers. First of all, Bebel endeavored to keep sex differences in reproduction within the socialist community. He maintained that “the only dissimilarity which has a right to permanence is that established by Nature for the fulfillment of a natural purpose” (p. 122). Secondly, he seems to imply that the community would only *help* women bring up their children: “educators, friends, young girls are at hand for all the cases in which she needs help” (p. 232). Here I agree with Sheila Rowbotham’s assessment that “Bebel envisaged communitarian forms developing within daily life” (1993, p. 142). That is to say, he didn’t see the socialist commune as regulating every aspect of the organization of the society. Rather, he saw society as the place where the person would engage in both individual and community activities. He did state that social life would become more and more public (p. 221), but nevertheless he allowed for a private space of individuals, especially in the realm of sexual relations. The line between the private space of the individual and the public space of the community is not very clearly drawn. Bebel seems to rely on a mechanism of self-regulation of the socialist community, following the laws of Nature. In my opinion, by introducing the laws of Nature in the socialist community, he still assigns women the duty to procreate, and still assumes that taking

care of children is a mother's (or at least a woman's) responsibility.

All the transformations of family life that I discussed above would find their final expression, in Bebel's view, in the establishment of "a marriage founded on the free untrammelled choice of love" (p. 220). Bebel does not state very clearly whether the institution of marriage will endure in the future socialist society, but nevertheless he advocates for a form of marriage that is radically different from the bourgeois, property-based marriage. Bebel places the greatest value on "free love" as the basis of the relations between the sexes, a perspective which I argue contains a male bias. Bebel aims to extend the freedom to engage in sexual relations based on love and free choice to both men and women. In doing so, he fails to recognize that this perspective on the relations between sexes is based on a male-patterned sexual desire. That is, he holds that women, same as men, desire the greatest access to sexual partners, and that they are free to engage in such relationships without any additional responsibilities. The male heterosexual bias embedded in Bebel's notion of free love is evident in two instances. First of all, it is hard to place motherhood in Bebel's vision of free relations between the sexes, as this vision does not take into account the social expectations with respect to the consequences of free love. Such expectations ascribed women the responsibility of

taking care of the children that might be the outcome of these free relations. As a consequence, men and women are still placed in unequal positions for entering and developing free love relations. The heterosexual bias reflects in his assumption that free relations between sexes necessarily mean heterosexual relations. Therefore, Bebel's view of the relations between the sexes, in the future socialist society seems to rest on an 'enlightened' male selfish desire. He contends that men and women should be free to establish sexual relationships based solely on mutual consent and (to his defense) on "mental affinity" (p. 48). The purpose of the couple will be, in his opinion, the development of the persons involved. However, Bebel fails to recognize that by maintaining the sexual divisions of labor in reproduction, he establishes unequal positions for men and women to entry a free-love relationship. Moreover, the same sexual division of labor prevents men and women from sharing this free-love relationship on equal terms.

Engels: The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State

Engels' work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, published in 1884, is "a comprehensive study of the origins of women's oppression and the development of

the family” (Goldman, 1993, p.38). Engels saw the origin of women’s oppression in the emergence of the monogamous family, as an institution that sustained private property. *The Origin* embarks on an analysis of different types of families, based on the findings of the American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, to conclude that the replacement of the capitalist mode of production with the socialist communal relations of work will liberate women from the oppression they experienced in the *bourgeois* family.

The fundamental premise of Engels’s analysis, as expressed in the 1884 *Preface* of his work was that: “According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a two fold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, shelter, and the tools necessary for that production; on the other hand, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.” (Engels, 1986, pp.35-36). From a feminist perspective, the analytical distinction between the sphere of production and that of reproduction is Engels’ most promissory contribution to the Marxist analysis of society. This theoretical approach seemed to offer the ground for acknowledging the “centrality of reproduction to the historical process” (Goldman, 1993, p.38). Engels’ analysis of different types of families is therefore

meant to show that the form of family determines the social organization as much as the mode of production. However, as feminist authors (Sayers et. all, 1987) show, Engels failed to follow his own methodological guidelines.

In the second chapter of *The Origin* (The Family), Engels presents an anthropological account of the evolution of the family and of the gradual “subjugation of one sex by the other” (1986, p.96) (i.e. of women by men). Based on Morgan’s findings from his study of American Indian tribes, Engels presented the first step in the historical transformations of the relations between sexes as the passage from the primitive “group marriage” to the “gens system” when incest became taboo. A second step that drew the circle of possible relations among sexes even narrower was the passage from the “gens system” to the single-pair system. Both the gens system and the single-pair system were based on communal living arrangements, where status and possessions were inherited through female line. In time, as men began to accumulate property (that is to produce more than they consumed), yet another transformation occurred. The monogamous family emerged as a way of securing the preservation of private property. According to Engels, this moment historically marks the origin of women’s oppression. For Engels, the end of what he considered a matriarchal organization of society, and the emergence of monogamy rep-

resented “*the world-historical defeat of the female sex*[emphasis in the text]” (Engels, 1986, p.87). In contrast with the former matrilineal kinship, the organization of the monogamous family was based on women’s servitude: “The man took command in the home [...]; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude. She became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (Engels, 1986, p. 90-91).

When presenting the transformations of the relations between sexes, Engels’ main concern is to link these changes with the antagonism between propertied and proletarian classes in the bourgeois society. This is the reason why his analysis rapidly effaces the relations of domination between men and women to focus mostly on class exploitation. In *The Origin*, Engels states that “the monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of one sex by the other” and “it announces a struggle between the sexes”(1986, p.96). Having made this statement, which seems to argue for a distinct relation of domination of women by men, Engels immediately twists his argument to explain this inequality as (still) essentially class oppression: “the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male” (1986, p.96).

Engels established a causal relation between private property and women’s subordination in the bourgeois family. This unidirectional relation

has further implications for how he conceives of men and women relations in propertyless families. Engels privileged the proletarian family over the bourgeois family, because, in his opinion the former was based on love, and not on economic constraints. He argued that “the ruling class remains dominated by the familiar economic influences and therefore only in exceptional cases does it provide instances of really freely contracted marriages, while among the oppressed class, these marriages are the rule” (Engels, 1986, p.113).

In sum, Engels’ analysis reached the conclusion that women are not oppressed by men, but by capital. In upper and middle-class families, women were kept in a subordinated position, because control over their sexual and reproductive life was key to the preservation of private property. Therefore, the abolition of private property would end that control. In working-class families, women were “exploited as unpaid workers in the home, and wage laborers outside it” (Scott, 1976, p.30). In this view, women’s domestic exploitation was a result of capitalist exploitation, because capitalism appropriated the surplus value of women’s housework⁷. Engels’ conclusion is problematic for at least two reasons. First of all, Engels fails to recognize women’s domination by men in the working-class families (Humphries, 1987; Gimenez 1987). As Heidi Hartmann puts it: “Surely capitalists

benefit from women's labor, but also surely men, who as husbands and fathers receive personalized services at home" (1981, p.9). Second of all, his understanding of women's sexual subordination in the family is reductionist. The desire to preserve private property certainly may be a reason why men would want to control women's reproductive functions. However, women are also subject to domestic violence and rape within the marriage, and later on feminists have argued that women's sexual subordination is rather part of a social structure of violence that defines relations between sexes than a result of capitalist relations (Firestone, 1979; Millet 1990; MacKinnon 1991).

The structure of Engels' work is very similar to that of Bebel's. Engels examines the historical development of family in order to argue for the necessity of the socialist transformation of the society. The oppressive nature of the family could only be overcome, Engels believed, in the future socialist society. The transformation of property relations and the entry of women into social production would bring a thorough transformation of the relations between sexes: "With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private house-keeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of children becomes a public affair, society looks after all children alike,

whether they are legitimate or not. This removes all the anxiety about the "consequences" that prevents a girl from giving herself completely to the man she loves. Will not that suffice to bring about the gradual growth of *unconstrained sexual intercourse* ? [my emphasis in the text]" (Engels, 1986, p.107).

A further discussion is in order here to illuminate the problematic assumptions, which are hidden in Engels' perspective on the transformation of the relations between sexes, as enunciated above. Like August Bebel, Engels advocated love as the only basis for relations between sexes. In arguing for this idea, Engels faces the same difficulty as Bebel did, because he wants to maintain love at the level of individual, private relations, while at the same time he allocates child-care to society. His perspective on free love is slightly different from that of Bebel, but nevertheless carries the same male heterosexual bias. He fails to recognize the patriarchal social expectations, which ascribe women the primary responsibility for taking care of children. Therefore, he isolates individual free love from the larger social context, and believes that the future socialist society will offer the grounds for men and women to engage in love relationships on equal terms. On close examination these terms appear though unequal.

First of all, Engels' perspective on the relations between sexes is ambiguous. On one hand,

he considers that the future socialist society will actually install true monogamy, not only for women, but also for men. On the other hand, he wants to leave individuals the choice of separating from a relationship, if this relationship does not carry anymore “the intense emotion of individual sex love” (Engels, 1986, p.114). Moreover he states that this emotion is likely to end “especially among men” (Engels, 1986, p.114). In these instances, it becomes clear that Engels uncritically endorses a patriarchal view of female sexuality, which considers women to be monogamous and essentially concerned with reproduction. On the other hand, men are thought to be more likely to pursue sexual love for more women, without concern for reproduction. Engels’ perspective on free love discloses thus its male-bias, manifested in the complete disconnection between sexuality and reproduction that Engels envisions for the future society. Sexuality is a matter of privacy, while reproduction is a matter of social concern. The consequences of this thinking are actually that female sexuality and female reproductive functions become a matter of social concern, while male sexuality and male contribution to reproduction remain the private concern of individuals.

The analysis that I presented above ties in closely with the examination of the state socialist treatment of women, as I will present it in the next two chapters. As Hilda Scott (1976) argues

“*The Origin of the Family* provided a program for the socialist women’s movement which has remained virtually unmodified down to the present” (p.36). This program had three basic claims. First of all, women had to be granted complete equality with men before the law, secondly they were to achieve economic independence through employment outside the home, and finally they were to be freed of their domestic burden by the assumption of household duty by the society (Scott, 1976, p.36). This agenda, with no modification, formed the basis for the state socialist legislative and social program for the emancipation of women. Therefore, all the assumptions about women’s role in reproduction were transferred at the level of policy making.

The Bolsheviks: Aleksandra Kollontai’s views on love and Lenin’s perspective on the emancipation of women

The Russian ‘version’ of the socialist project for women’s emancipation can be compounded from the writings of the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution, mainly Aleksandra Kollontai, and Lenin. Actually, it was only Aleksandra Kollontai who devoted time to the issues of sexual inti-

macy and love in the future socialist society, and who publicly expressed her views in speeches or books such as *The Family Question* (1908), *The Social Bases of the Woman Question* (1909), *Sexual Relationships and the Class Struggle*, *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, or *Society and Maternity* (1915)⁸. I will, nevertheless, include Lenin's perspective on women's emancipation in my discussion because his views were influential for the Bolshevik policies, and later of for state socialist politics.

Aleksandra Kollontai was repeatedly singled out by both historians of feminism and of the socialist movement as "one of the first to make an effort to reconcile revolutionary Marxism with the women's movement" (Zhuravskaya, 1998, p.20). Richard Evans considers that, unlike other socialists, she "did try to establish a theory of sexual freedom and emancipation" (1978, p.16). Richard Stites characterizes Kollontai as "a feminist voice"⁹ (Stites in Slaughter and Kern, 1981, p.116) among the Bolshevik leaders. In line with the discussion that I developed in this chapter, I will focus on Kollontai's views on free love and maternity, and show their similarities and differences with Engels' and Bebel's perspectives.

Aleksandra Kollontai was first and foremost concerned with the particular oppression of working-class women, and her philosophical, as well as political ideas stem from her belief in the

value and power of the proletariat. Among her shifting perspectives on various issues, ranging from sexuality and love to the socialist Revolution, one can nevertheless trace a common (and constant) endorsement of a view that sees the working-collective as the highest form of social organization. In Kollontai's conception, the ultimate goal of communist workers was "love-comradeship" or "love duty to the collective" (Kollontai, "Make Way for Winged Eros", p.286, cited in Zhuravskaya, 1998, p. 32). Kollontai saw the development of such love as an integral part of building communism. The basis of the communist collective was to be, in her vision, the mutual care of its members. Kollontai thought that however great individual love, as experienced in the couple, might be, "the ties binding [people] to the collective will always take precedence, will be firmer, more complex, and more organized." ("Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations", p. 234, cited in Zhuravskaya, 1998, p.34).

Kollontai's concept of love, and the way she envisages sexual relations in the future socialist society offer a more comprehensive approach to the dilemma of free love and motherhood. Socialists like Bebel and Engels expected that sexual relations in the future socialist society would develop according to natural laws. As I showed in the previous sections, this perspective entailed masculinist assumptions about what the

natural laws of relations between sexes were. Kollontai does not appeal to nature either in her conception of the relations between sexes or in her definition of motherhood. She frequently talks about the communist or “proletarian morality” (*Social Bases of the Woman Question*), which would form the basis of the future work-collective. However, she does not assume that a new type of social (and sexual relations) will emerge ‘naturally’. Rather, she believes that the individuals will have *to be taught*, in the future, “to look at the world through the prism of the collective and not through [their] own selfish ego” (Kollontai, cited in Stites, 1978, p.267). The main point of contention between Kollontai’s perspective and those of Engels and Bebel refers exactly to this latter point. Bebel did talk about the relinquishment of personal egoism in the future society, but both him and Engels expected that this would happen ‘naturally’. Kollontai proves much more sensitive to the social assumptions that shape what is considered ‘natural’, when she realizes that such a thorough transformation cannot take place without socialization.

Kollontai’s views on the family stemmed mainly from her embracing of a future society in which love (transformed sexual energy) would be the driving force of the community of laboring people. She saw the Russian society in very similar terms as her socialist comrades viewed

their contemporary capitalist societies: “We are people living in the world of property relationships, a world of sharp class contradictions and of an individualistic morality.” (Kollontai, “Sexual Relationships and the Class Struggle”, p. 240, cited in Zhuravskaya, 1998, p.31). Family, in her opinion was central to the maintenance of both the economic and the social relations, but above all “family was a narrow cell that fostered selfish egotism” (Zhuravskaya, 1998, p.53). The dedication to the couple was extreme in the case of women, who were pressured by social conventions to assume that love for *one man* was their main purpose in life. Against this social expectation, Kollontai argued that women’s liberation required that women started to view love and emotions within family relationships as men did – as only part of their total existence (“Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle”, p.248). Kollontai added a cultural dimension to the classic socialist analysis of the family. She viewed the family not only as an economic unit, a base for property relations, but also as “a cultural institution which maintained the values of authoritarianism and male domination, based on female submissiveness and emotional dependency” (Zhuravskaya, 1998, p. 69). Her solution for ending women’s domestic predicament is nevertheless the ‘classic’ socialist solution. She believed that work was the ultimate liberating force for women. In her *Autobiography of a Sexually*

Emancipated Communist Woman, she argued that women could establish their true individuality only by becoming economic independent. Her answer to the 'woman question' was in line with the socialist project. "Socialism and only socialism", she argued, "would bring complete equality and independence for women, the state care of children, and full freedom in the area of love" (Kollontai, "The Family Question", cited in Stites, 1978, p.260).

Kollontai's views on love argue for a different perspective on the relations between the sexes, because she exposes these relations not as natural, but as socially constructed. She argued that individualism and selfishness dominated love relations in her contemporary society, and that they would be transformed in the future society through a process of social learning. However, in what concerns the specific ways in which free love and maternity were going to be incorporated in the future socialist society, Kollontai faces the same tension between private sexual relations and the public regulation of maternity and childcare. On one hand, she states that "once the relations between the sexes cease to perform the economic and social function of the former family, they are no longer the concern of the worker's collective" (Kollontai, "Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations", p. 66, cited in Zhuravskaya p.37). On the other hand, she considered that relations be-

tween sexes should be subject to legislative regulations in matters which concern "the increase or decrease of the population required by the national economic collective" (Kollontai, "Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations", p. 228, cited in Zhuravskaya p.37). Kollontai shared with all the other socialists the assumption that motherhood was a woman's social duty, and that taking care of children was primarily women's responsibility. Kollontai believed that "maternity was not only a natural function of women, but also a moral duty for Communist women" (Stites, in Slaughter and Kern, 1981, p.117). In 1918, she founded the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, which, in her autobiography, she regarded as her most important achievement. The guiding principles of the policy of the department mirror most clearly an understanding of motherhood as the natural function of women:

1. Child-bearing is the social function of the woman and the duty of the government is to enable her to fulfill this function.
 2. It is the duty of the government to educate the mother-citizen.
 3. The child must be physically protected; breast-feeding is a social duty of women.
 4. Bringing up of the child is to take place in the atmosphere of a socialist family.
- (Heitlinger, 1978, p.108)

To sum up, even though she recognized that love, and relations among sexes are socially constructed, and do not follow natural laws, even in the future socialist society, she nevertheless still ascribed women the social duty to procreate.

Lenin was never publicly explicit on his views on sexual relations. The few instances in which he voiced his opinions on sexual relations between men and women are to be found in his private correspondence with Inessa Armand, or in private conversations with Clara Zetkin. His letters to Inessa Armand, written in 1915, are a response to her intention to publish a pamphlet on sexual morality. Her discussion was centered on free love and she thought “even transient passion and love affair are preferable to the bourgeois marriage/ morality” (Armand cited in Stites, 1978, p.261). However, Lenin did not defend transient relationships, and was much more inclined to speak in favor of monogamy and a traditional (Victorian) configuration of relationships among men and women.

Lenin’s writings on ‘the woman question’ concentrate on the beneficial effects that women’s participation in the work force had for women’s position in the family. As Marx and Engels, Lenin believed women’s oppression was rooted in the larger economic arrangements of the society. The social and economic context in which Lenin formulated his perspective on women’s emancipation was that of a pre-capital-

ist society. Speaking from this context, he stated that “[...] that the drawing of women into production is, at bottom, progressive” (Lenin, “The Development of Capitalism in Russia”, cited in Tucker, 1975, p. 681). The drawing of women into social production and industry was in Lenin’s opinion, their way out of “the narrow circle of domestic and family relations” to which they were previously confined. Women’s entry into paid work would “stimulate their development and increases their independence, in other words, create conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of pre-capitalist relations” (Lenin, cited in Tucker, 1975, pp.681-682). By entering factory work, Lenin argued the woman became “as much a breadwinner as the man [was]” and this, in turn, was a positive and important factor in “the woman’s struggle for her independence in the family”. Lenin also stated that women should participate in industrial work on an equal foot with men, a situation which he termed “the equality of the proletariat” (Lenin, cited in Tucker, 1975, pp.681-682).

When writing about capitalist societies (“Capitalism and Female Labor”, 1913), Lenin employed Engels’ class analysis, and argued for essentially economic reasons for women’s oppression. Lenin’s understanding of the nature of women’s position in capitalist societies asserts a two-fold economic exploitation: once as unpaid

domestic workers, and twice as sexual commodities. He contended that “millions and millions of women live as household slaves” (Lenin, “Capitalism and Female Labor”, cited in Tucker, 1975, p.682). Lenin understood *working-class* women’s domestic slavery as essentially a means of bourgeois exploitation, by which oppressors appropriated women’s unpaid work of “feeding and clothing the family”. Finally, prostitution epitomized the exploitative economic relations of capitalist societies, as “commerce in women’s bodies” (Lenin, “Capitalism and Female Labor”, cited in Tucker, 1975, p.682).

In addition to his advocacy of women’s participation in the labor force as their way of emancipating from the family, Lenin also expressed his views on a more thorough transformation of the family. He stated that “one cannot be a socialist, without demanding the full freedom of divorce” (Lenin, 1916, cited in Stites, 1978, p.263), and “the annulment of all laws against abortion” (Lenin, cited in Stites, 1978, p.264). However, he did not further examine his claims on the transformation of the family to account for a perspective on child rearing in the future socialist society. Same as his other socialist comrades, he struggled with the shifting line between the public and the private and failed to answer the questions: *If child rearing was to become public, who would assume that responsibility? And if women still have the social duty to become*

mothers, how does that reflect in their prospects for equal participation with men in social life?

Conclusions

For most of the nineteenth century socialists, whose writings I have examined in the scope of this paper, women’s equality with men was understood as mainly their equal participation in the working collective. However, this concept of equality left unexamined the sexual division of labor by which men are central to production and women are central to reproduction. In the process of change towards a new socialist society, women were given the additional role of workers, but the bases of the unequal gender order were never contested.

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Notes

¹ Feminist historians have documented the struggles between feminists and socialists at the end of the nineteenth century. Feminists' claims met with, but in many cases departed from the socialist political claims. Feminists pointed out to men's patriarchal privileges in the family, women's subordination by love, and claimed women's right to self-fulfillment, but they met men's resistance in asserting their demands (see Boxter and Quataert, 1978). The socialist question took precedence over the woman question, and women's liberation was

understood further only in the framework of the socialist struggle against capitalism.

² For a discussion of the relation between the “woman question” and “the socialist question” see Boxer, Marilyn J. and Quataert, Jean H.(eds).(1978). *Socialist women : European socialist feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*. New York : Elsevier; Richard Evans. 1979(1977) *The feminists : women’s emancipation movements in Europe, America, and Australasia, 1840-1920* London: Barnes & Noble.

³ There are several reasons for my selection of works here. The first two works are, in my opinion the two most influential socialist writings that address the women’s liberation. As Boxter and Quataert show, they were “translated into many languages, serialized and paraphrased in socialist periodicals, quoted endlessly, reprinted numerous times (Bebel’s book appeared in its fiftieth edition in 1913)” (1978, p.10) and they held a “canonical status” (Lichtheim, G.,1961, p.241, cited in Boxter,M.& Quataert, J., 1978, p. 10) within the socialist movement. I selected Lenin’s writings because of his prominent status in the Russian Bolshevik revolution, and the influential role that his writings had on the establishment of the state socialist ideology. Last, but not least, Aleksandra Kollontai offers a view on the transformation of the family that was highly influential for the Bolshevik family policies between 1917 and 1936. From a feminist perspective, her writings also account for the most radical perspective on changing the status of women.

⁴ According to Sheila Rowbotham, “Engels used the word reproduction in a double sense, meaning both the activities involved in enabling life to go on, producing food, clothing and shelter, and the bearing and rearing of children, which he describes as “the production of hu-

man beings themselves, the propagation of the species”” (1993, p.143).

⁵ I would like to add here that, in Bebel’s vision such a society is not a utopia, but rather develops organically from the material conditions that are already present in the capitalist society. Bebel was writing in the thought stream of the so-called ‘scientific socialism’ whose foundations were laid by Marx.

⁶ For a discussion of the structure of socialist economy and the ways in which it prioritized the “productive” sphere over the “non-productive” sphere, see Kornai, J. (1992). *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷ This is a point which Marxist feminists have defended. See for example: Mariarosa Dalla Costa. (1975). *A General Strike*. Edmond, W. & Fleming, S. *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework, and the Wages Due*. Briston: Falling Wall Press. For them, the solution to women’s domestic exploitation is that household becomes paid work.

⁸ Richard Stites (1978) strongly argues that, even though Aleksandra Kollontai offered the most comprehensive articulation of the Russian socialist view on women’s emancipation, her writings and ideas were marginalized in the making of the Bolshevik politics.

⁹ Aleksandra Kollontai’s feminism developed in the social and historical context of the end of the nineteenth century Russia, and it can only be understood as a Russian, working-class feminism. She was very of the European liberal feminists (as she clearly states in *The Social Bases of the Woman Question*), and sometimes she voiced criticism against her female colleagues in the international socialist movement, like Clara Zetkin and Inessa Armand.