Alexandra Kollontai and Red Love

Friday 29 July 2011, by EBERT Teresa (Date first published: 1 July 1999).

WHAT IS "RED Love"—and more specifically, what is a socialist, or more complexly, a communist theory of love and sexuality?

As a way of working toward an answer, I want to reread the Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai's ideas about love and sexuality. How we reread Kollontai today raises questions not only about the revolutionary value of her work but also about the historicity of our own reading. To avoid subsuming her revolutionary insights, we need to read dialectically between the current historical situation as well as the one out of which she wrote—turning our critique-al attention to both our own limits and to those in which Kollontai worked.

The first problem is the way knowledge about Kollontai has been erased from the cultural memory. Aside from a brief revival of interest in the seventies and early eighties, Kollontai is largely forgotten among feminists and socialists alike.

As a Marxist revolutionary and Bolshevik, Kollontai struggled for the economic, social and sexual emancipation of women in Europe and Russia during the first decades of the century. She played a leading role in the revolutionary struggles of the time and was considered, along with Trotsky and Lunacharsky, to be among the most dynamic speakers for the Russian Revolution (Kollontai, 108).

She was also a key participant in the formation of the early Soviet state, becoming the first to head the Department of Social Welfare in the new Soviet Union and later the head of the Women's Department. Kollontai summed up her own life by saying that "women and their fate occupied me all my life and concern for their lot brought me to socialism" (30).

Kollontai was deeply committed to the class struggle and convinced that the emancipation of women required not only the end of capitalism but also a concerted effort to transform personal relations along with the struggle for social change. As part of this effort, she worked especially hard to make socialism responsive to the needs of women and children and to create a new communist sexual morality for a workers' state

Thus she pioneered in the development of social welfare and collective child care; in the reform of marriage and property laws; in freeing women from the isolated drudgery of the home and to be participants in the collectivization of domestic work; and in articulating a new theory of sexuality for a collective society.

But Kollontai was also a prominent critic of the bureaucratization and dominant economic policies of the early Soviet state. This led, especially under Stalin, to her being largely discredited and her ideas suppressed as she was, in effect, exiled to a series of diplomatic posts from which she was not allowed to return until the last years of her life. (For a good introduction to Kollontai's life and writings, see Kollontai, *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Writings*, ed. Alix Holt.)

But this is all largely forgotten. If Kollontai is remembered at all, it is likely to be a misrecognition of her as a proponent of the "glass of water theory" of sexuality, which was commonly seen as a defense of promiscuity and "free love"—the idea that sex should be as accessible and easily satisfied

as quenching one's thirst by drinking a glass of water.

In fact, however, Kollontai not only did not originate the "glass of water theory," her anti-bourgeois theories developed a much more complex view that understood sexuality as both a social and historical relation (see Kollontai 13, Clements 231). Nonetheless, charges of sexual extremism, including the "glass of water theory," have been widely attributed to Kollontai—both in the West and in the Soviet Union—as a way of ideologically distorting and undermining her transformative understanding of human interpersonal relations and social change.

As we approach Kollontai and the issue of a red theory of sexuality today, we have to contend with even more ideological distortions—not the least of which is the attempt to suppress the history of revolutionary workers' movements and class struggle and the efforts to try to reduce Marxism to an accommodationist postmarxism.

We read Kollontai at a time when many socialist feminists have embraced poststructuralist politics and when theories of sexuality are dominated by discourses of desire. It has now become commonplace to consider sexuality as separate from class; thus the autonomy of desire has become one of the deepest bourgeois "Truths." Such positions are completely antithetical to the revolutionary class-consciousness and profoundly materialist understanding that Kollontai brought to her work on sexuality.

Throughout her political writings, public speeches and fiction as well as in her political work, Kollontai consistently held to historical materialist principles and a revolutionary commitment to the emancipation of women and the workers' struggle, and especially a radical reunderstanding of bourgeois notions of sexuality and love.

The core principle around which her work is developed is first, a rigorous materialist analysis of the historically varied forms of love and sexuality and their class basis. Second, an unwavering commitment to the role and importance of the workers' collective in building the new society and in shaping interpersonal relations. Third, the firm conviction that effective social change involves the dialectical interrelation of ideological struggle and economic change.

In "Sexual Relations and Class Struggle," Kollontai criticizes the:

"*idea that proletarian sexual morality is no more than superstructure,' and that there is no place for any change in this sphere until the economic base of society has been changed. As if the ideology of a certain class is formed only when the breakdown in the socio-economic relationships, guaranteeing the dominance of that class, has been completed! All the experience of history teaches us that a social group works out its ideology, and consequently its sexual morality, in the process of its struggle with hostile social forces."} (249) Kollontai argued, in other words, for the necessity of carrying out ideological struggle over the structure of gender and sexual relations {simultaneously} with the social and economic struggles. We forget the enormity of such a project in her time –a time of world war and massive destruction of the economy, the social infrastructure and the population, followed by revolution and civil war, and the overwhelming difficulties of building a new egalitarian society out of such debilitating conditions. But we also know the cost of not doing so—which was the resurgence, in the late20s and early 30s under Stalin of highly regressive patriarchal relations of the family and of gender and sexual oppression, even as women made substantial gains in the economy. This was a betrayal of the Leninist workers' state that Kollontai*

had envisioned—in which equality of economic relations had been intended to support, and in turn to be fostered, by a new communist sexual morality of free, open and equal relations of love and comradeship. Kollontai was quite aware of the dynamics of this regressive turn—as she made clear in her last public speech in 1926 "On Marriage and Everyday Life " (300-11). The ideological struggle at the time between a resurgence of an entrenched, patriarchal family as opposed to what Kollontai called "new lifestyles" of the proletariat was a result, she argued, of the "class contradictions" still existing in the new society. The emancipation of women, she contended, required a political commitment of economic resources to provide for the welfare of women (many of whom were unemployed and still involved in domestic labor) in order to free them from financial dependency on individual men and patriarchal property relations. The "socialist approach," she argued, means that "every woman has the right to desire and strive to be free from anxieties when bringing up her child, and to be free from the fear that some day she and the child will find themselves in need and without any means of sustenance" (308-309). It is precisely this "socialist solution" that was largely turned aside at the time, owing especially to a lack of economic resources but also to political and ideological opposition to the possibilities of collective restructuring of the family that had been opened up by the revolution. Given her materialist and dialectical understanding, Kollontai would be quite critical of today's left cultural politics and postmodern theories of sexuality for their profound neglect of the economic basis of the "emotional and psychological" and the unavoidable class determinations of love and sexuality. Kollontai argued that sexual relations, "family and marriage are historical categories, phenomena which develop in accordance with the economic relations that exist at the given level of production" (225) and change under economic pressure. "Social and economic changes," according to Kollontai, create conditions "that demand and give rise to a new basis for psychological experience" and "change all our ideas about the role of women in social life and undermine the sexual morality of the bourgeoisie" (246). The current reifications of desire—in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Gallop, Butler, and de Lauretis, as well as other poststructuralist, feminist and queer theorists (see Ebert, Morton)—in which desire is considered not only autonomous from the economic but also as primarily an individual circuit of pleasure, are opposed by Kollontai's complex materialist and collective vision. "Love," Kollontai argued, "is a profoundly social emotion. Love is not in the least aprivate' matter concerning only the two loving persons: love possess an uniting element which is valuable to the collective" (278-279). At the core of all Kollontai's thinking on sexuality was her analysis of how:

"Each historical (and therefore economic) epoch in the development of society has its own ideal of marriage and its own sexual morality . . . Different economic systems have different moral codes. Not only each stage in the development of society, but each class has its corresponding sexual morality . . . the more firmly established the principles of private property, the stricter the moral code."

Kollontai thus found that "The ideal of love in marriage only begins to appear when, with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the family loses its productive functions and remains a consumer unit also serving as a vehicle for the preservation of accumulated capital" (284).

Kollontai made the important argument that the very development, in capitalist society, of a sexualized love "that embraced both the flesh and soul" (283)—as opposed to feudal notions of chaste, chivalrous love—becomes the primary ideological mechanism for securing marital cooperation and stability in the project of accumulating and preserving capital.

Nearly all sexual relations in capitalism are, for Kollontai, economic and property relations. The legal ones—including marriage—Kollontai contends, were all "grounded in (a) material and financial considerations, [and] (b) economic dependence of the female sex on the family breadwinner—the husband—rather than the social collective . . ." (225).

The other side of bourgeois marriage in capitalism is prostitution—not only at the time Kollontai was writing, but also for us today, given the massive expansion of the global sex trafficking in women and children. "The trade in women's flesh," Kollontai pointed out, "is not surprising when you consider that the whole bourgeois way of life is based on buying and selling." (264)

Prostitution and pornography have divided contemporary feminists, particularly around the issues of sex workers' rights, identity and self-determination (e.g. Kempadoo and Doezema, Nagle). All too often these debates are isolated from basic economic questions of labor exploitation and become empty claims for the freedom of "choice" and "free expression" of their sexuality, as in Drucilla Cornell's argument that what is needed is to protect women's "imaginary domain" so they have the right to the self-representation of their "sexuate beings" as sex workers and to organize (45-58).

Such arguments may help alleviate the worst conditions—for example, by enabling sex workers to organize —but they in no way engage the structure of exploitative relations. In contrast, Kollontai cuts straight through these empty debates to go right to the core of exploitative relations, showing the connections between the economic exploitation of sex workers and the commodification of everyday sexual relations under capitalism. As she argues in "Prostitution and Ways of Fighting It,"

"(T)he sale of women's labour…is closely and inseparably connected with the sale of the female body … This is the horror and hopelessness that results from the exploitation of labour by capital. When a woman's wages are insufficient to keep her alive, the sale of favours seems a possible subsidiary occupation. The hypocritical morality of bourgeois society encourages prostitution by the structure of its exploitative economy, while at the same time mercilessly covering with contempt any girl or woman who is forced to take this path" (263).

The only way to end prostitution, Kollontai argued, was to struggle against the conditions that compelled women to find prostitution a necessary means of subsistence. Kollontai put forth a complex, materialist understanding of this struggle.

The "workers' revolution in Russia," she argued, had "shattered the basis of capitalism" and with it the "main sources of prostitution—private property and the policy of strengthening of the family" (at least in its first few years), but this was not enough.

"Other factors" she insisted, were "still in force. Homelessness, neglect, bad housing conditions, loneliness and low wages for women are still with us…These and other economic and social conditions lead women to prostitute their bodies" (265).

Thus, as Kollontai made very clear, "to struggle against prostitution chiefly means to struggle against these conditions" (266). For as "the first All-Russian Congress of Peasant and Working Woman" stated, "A woman of the Soviet labour republic is a free citizen with equal rights, and cannot and must not be the object of buying and selling" (266).

This is the main difference between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism continues to define

freedom—particularly the freedom of "civil society" and the free market—as the right of individuals to sell themselves and for those with money (capital) to buy others—to buy and sell wage labor—but it also entails the buying and selling of people's sexuality even their bodies.

Democracy, over the years, has tried to put some constraints on the buying and selling of people under capitalism, applying legal sanctions against some forms —notably slavery and, in most cases, prostitution. But that does not change the reality of the pervasive de facto buying and selling of sexuality and bodies in capitalism.

The struggle against prostitution, as Kollontai and the early history of the revolutionary "workers' state" made clear, needs to be the struggle first against capitalism—against rule of private property and the buying and selling of people—and second against the array of social and economic conditions compelling women into prostitution.

Kollontai's unwavering materialist analysis of love and sexuality made her a revolutionary for our own times. Her work poses a serious challenge to poststructuralist theories for their erasure of the economic exchange, commodification and capital accumulation involved in sexual relations under late capitalism.

Women's economic dependence on husbands has lessened as more women themselves become wage earners, but today's dual-income family is just a much a unit of consumption—and, in the case of the "owning class," a unit of capital accumulation. What has changed, I would argue, is the enormous expansion of the commodification and exploitation of sexuality and bodies for profit—the buying and selling of bodies and the representations of bodies, whether in prostitution, pornography or the mass media.

The commodification of pleasure and desire for profit is an inescapable aspect of our lives and our sexuality—yet this is largely absent as a subject of poststructuralist theories of sexuality. Rather, the valorization of transgressive/guilty pleasures as a liberating force in poststructuralist theories (such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Grosz) is itself an effect of capitalist commodifications of pleasures. The poststructuralist fetishization of pleasure thus forces us to ask how subversive are theories of sexuality that obscure the economic relations of desire and the class interests embedded in its current forms (see *Transformation* vol. 2, Marxism, Queer Theory, Gender).

Kollontai took her materialist analysis even further and critiqued the form of sexual subjectivity that emerges out of the class interests and economic relations of capitalism. Briefly, she analysed the "contemporary psyche" as characterized by an "extreme individuality, egoism that has become a cult"; by property relations—"the idea of possessing' the married partner"—and by "the belief that the two sexes are unequal, that they are of unequal worth in every way, in every sphere, including the sexual sphere" (242). It only takes a moment's observation to show how strongly these features have continued into late capitalism. While inequality among the sexes has changed some of its forms—it continues unabated as long as there are still significant economic differences between men and women. The one we most neglect, however, is the extraordinary way that relations of sexuality, love and desiring are so fundamentally grounded on property relations. The "bourgeoisie," Kollontai argued, "have carefully tended and fostered the ideal of absolute possession of thecontracted partner's' emotional as well as physical I', thus extending the concept of property rights to include the right to the other person's whole spiritual and emotional world" (242). The constant perpetuation of this subjectivity is one of the primary projects of bourgeois ideology—from operas like "Carmen" to any popular romance novel or to such "hot" Broadway shows as "The Blue

Room” with a nude Nicole Kidman—in all these forms the measure of love and sexual desiring is the fantasy of possessing the object of desire. As a result, Kollontai argued, “healthy sexual instinct has been turned by monstrous social and economic relations . . . into unhealthy carnality. The sexual act has become an aim in itself—just another way of obtaining pleasure, through lust sharpened with excesses and through distorted, harmful titillations of the flesh .... Prostitution is the organized expression of this distortion of the sex drive .. .” (286). This may sound rather puritanical in an age of increasing acceptance of anything that will intensify the pleasures of sensuousness—even pain and violence. But Kollontai demonstrated that the pursuit of pleasure as a performance of freedom is a very specific historical practice of the owning classes and is not the basis for egalitarian, sharing relations of mutual sexual pleasure and personal regard among people. The valorization of excessive stimulation, excitation and sensation as ends in themselves distorts human relations and capabilities and is a direct reflection of the alienating commodification and exploitation of human relations that arises with capitalism. Claudia Broyelle extends this analysis, in her book on {Women's Liberation in China}, when writing about sexuality under capitalism: {"In a society where the division of labor becomes more accentuated, where the vast majority of people are deliberately deprived of creativity, where work has no other value than its explicit monetary one, sexuality becomes{{ a means of escaping from society through self-centered sexual consumption, rather than the full expression of interpersonal relationships}}"} (Part 5, 2). Left sexual theories commonly represent sexual excess and transgressive pleasures as subversive of bourgeois morality and thus as emancipatory practices—this is, for example, a frequent postmodern defense of pornography (e.g. see Penley). But this fundamentally fails to recognize the relations involved and instead to further promote the ideology of individual consumption and personal gratification against the interests and well being of others. The left has embraced an “anti-repressive hypothesis” of sexuality that is no different in its effects and no more antibourgeois than the “repressive hypothesis” Foucault describes: “theputting into discourse of sex’,” Foucault explains, “has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement . . . the techniques of power exercised over sex have obeyed a principle . . . of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities” (12).

In fact, the “increasing incitement” and excitation of sex is exactly what capitalism requires for the continuing proliferation of sexual commodification and control of subjectivities. As Reimut Reiche states in his book on *Sexuality and Class Struggle*, “desublimation” becomes yet another form of repression and control: when “individual sublimation is collectively broken down,” the individual is subjected to “the same powers which engineered his desublimation, and they henceforth decide for him how he is to behave . . . when and how he reacts in an openly sexual way, and when and how he curbs or gives free rein to aggressive urges” (135).

In contrast to bourgeois property relations and individual gratification in sexual relations, Kollontai argued that socialist relations of production—which are no longer organized around profit and the exploitation of labor of others—create the conditions for profoundly different interpersonal relations. These conditions make possible what she calls a new “communist morality”—that is, new principles of living for a workers’ collective:

“As regards sexual relations, communist morality demands first of all ***an end to all relations based***

on financial or other economic considerations*. The buying and selling of caresses destroys the sense of equality between the sexes, and thus undermines the basis of solidarity without which communist society cannot exist . . . . The stronger the ties between the members of the collective as a whole, the less the need to reinforce marital relations"* (emphasis added, 230).

Kollontai opened up a complex, integrated and materialist understanding of the revolutionary possibility of relationships no longer based in any way on commodification, economic exchange or financial considerations. Instead, she envisioned truly free—that is, equal—relations of love and comradeship necessary both for human fulfillment and for sustaining the connections among members in a collective.

This is the basis, for Kollontai, of a new class practice, a "proletarian morality" that "replace(s) the all-embracing and exclusive marital love of bourgeois culture," with "three basic principles: 1. Equality in relationships . . . 2. Mutual recognition of the rights of the other, of the fact that one does not own the heart and soul of the other (the sense of property, encouraged by bourgeois culture). 3. Comradely sensitivity, the ability to listen and understand the inner workings of the loved person (bourgeois culture demanded this only from the woman)." (291).

Kollontai firmly believed in the emancipatory potential of non-commodified and thus non-possessive relations among free individuals not bound by economic dependency. She believed in the social value of what she called "love-solidarity" based on comradeship and equality and contends these will "become the lever" in communist society that "competition and self-love were in the bourgeois society" (290).

While Kollontai's own articulation of human relations was heterosexual (she speaks only about relations between the sexes), her views of post-patriarchal, non-exclusive relationships open up the possibility for a radical post-heterosexual society. At the core of Kollontai's "communist morality" is the belief in the development of various degrees and kinds of intimacy—of sexuality, love, comradeship—among individuals connecting them together in a collective.

These intimate relations in no way preclude intimacy between members of the same sex, and, in fact, I would argue that a multiple, complex intimacy, across differences of sex and race follows from such an open, non-exclusive, non-singular "morality." Kollontai, in short, shows the way to develop a revolutionary sexual theory in which sexual difference is no longer the basis for the social division of desire because it is no longer the basis for the social division of labor.

An egalitarian workers' collective based on communist relations of production—in which, as Marx states in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, the needs of all are met—would abolish the exploitation of differences. Thus while differences—of sexuality, of race—may not "disappear," they would no longer be the basis of inequality, privilege and the exploitation of others—and no longer the basis of divisions of desire and labor.

Such radical changes will not occur automatically—they require, as Kollontai made very clear, unrelenting, all-embracing social and ideological struggle as an integral part of the class struggle to build a new social formation.

Kollontai's theory of sexuality shows the way to develop an emancipatory theory, a red theory of sexuality. She is all the more important today when leading postmodern left critics and queer feminists try to discredit historical materialist theories of sexuality as "left conservatism."

Judith Butler, for example, in her essay "Merely Cultural" and her presentation at the "Left Conservatism Workshop" (at the University of California-Santa Cruz, January 1998) decried the

resurgence of an economism and what she called an "anachronistic materialism that becomes the banner for a new Left orthodoxy" ("Left Conservatism II," 8). This "new orthodoxy on the Left," she says, "work[s] in tandem with a social and sexual conservatism that seeks to make questions of race and sexuality secondary to the real' business of politics, producing a new and eerie political formation of neoconservative Marxisms" ("Merely Cultural" 268). Such charges are, of course, part of the neoliberal propaganda aimed at legitimating the entrepreneurs of desire as citizens of freedom. A red theory of sexuality, as Kollontai demonstrated, is an understanding of the inseparable dialectical relation of sex and the material relations of production. It is a commitment to ending the economic exploitation and commodification of relations, and the social divisions of labor and desire. It is the struggle to build free and equal relations of love, sexuality and comradeship in which desire is neither simply sexual nor exclusive, but involves a solidarity of multiple connections and interrelations to others as well as to the work and welfare of the collective. These are relations that cannot be developed in a social formation dominated by property relations as the signifier of individual freedom. It is the struggle against this manufactured bourgeois freedom that Butler regards to be "Left Conservatism." Like the right-wing ideologues who have used "political correctness" to block progressive pedagogical practices, "Left Conservatism" is the discourse of occlusion: It attempts to halt, among other things, the struggle toward Red Love: that is, {{ {sexual and comradely solidarity} }}. Does Kollontai's vision of communist sexuality seem utopian? Yes—if we accept as inevitable the current neoliberalism and its tyranny of exploitative relations, social divisions of labor and commodified individualism of capitalism. But for Kollontai and other Bolsheviks in the early years of the Russian Revolution such relationships were a very real historical possibility. Their failure is a historical, political and economic problem that we need to carefully analyze—not just erase as obsolete—in order to learn why they failed and how to actualize the full possibilities of free and equal relations of love, sexuality and social collectivity Kollontai articulated. What such an examination would enable us to understand is how profoundly dialectical is the problem: how inseparable are the economic and the ideological; how fully integrated are sex and class, and how sexual freedom depends on the material economic means to meet people's needs. {{Teresa L. Ebert}} {{ {Works Cited} }} Broyelle, Claudia. Women's Liberation in China. 19 December 1998, http://www.blythe.org/mlm/misc/women/wom_ch_toc.htm . Butler, Judith. "Left Conservatism, II." Theory & Event 2.2 (1998). —-. "Merely Cultural." Social Text, 52-53 (1997). Clements, Barbara Evans. Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979. Cornell, Drucilla. At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Ebert, Teresa L. Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality. v.1. Trans. R. Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1980. Kempadoo, Kamala and Jo Doezema, eds. Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition. New York: Routledge, 1998. Kollontai. Alexandra. Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai. Ed. & Trans. Alix Holt. New York: Norton, 1977. Morton, Don. "Pataphysics of the Closet: The Political Economy ofComing Out'." Marxism, Queer Theory, Gender. Transformation 2 (1999).

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P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 81, July-August 1999.