

# Gender and the Communist Manifesto

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*“On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. . . . The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.”*

IF MARX AND Engels had bequeathed a set of cut-and-dried answers to theorists and activists rather than a set of useful questions, their writings on the family would be of little interest today. Working with scanty anthropological data and bound by the assumptions of their time, Marx and Engels compressed the complexity of family history, including the range of families normally found within any particular society, into a three-stage evolutionary schema of group marriage, followed by pairing marriage and then by monogamy.

While they saw beyond their contemporaries in noting the historical specificity and class origins of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois family, their discussion of the family as a mechanism for concentrating private wealth failed to consider transformative tendencies within bourgeois families, including the impact of the women’s movement. Nor did they explore the differing origins and dynamics of working-class families.

Engels correctly recognized that the subordination of wives and the growing independence of the nuclear family from larger kin networks were associated with the development of private property, but he had an idealist interpretation of the reason for this “world historical defeat of the female sex”—men’s desire to pass wealth onto their own biological sons. As Plekhanov later pointed out in *The Role of the Individual in History*, an economic interpretation of history is not the same as a materialist interpretation of history, because analysis remains at the level of people’s motive and ideas, merely substituting a cynical assessment of intentions for a utopian one.

The early writings of Marx also showed traces of idealism, as when he attributed the root of private property to “filthy self-interest.” Later, however, Marx recognized that it was the predominance of “self-interest”—indeed its very definition—that needed to be explained. From that point on he sought the source of phenomena and events not in people’s desires and motives, whether altruistic or selfish, but in the social relations of production and exchange, as well as the unintended consequences of the cooperation, coercion, and conflict that people entered into in any particular mode of production. Although Marx and Engels transcended their early Hegelian idealism in explaining class relations and alienation, they never applied their new insights to the analysis of gender relations and male dominance.

Further, Marx and Engels accepted the Victorian assumption that most sexual and gender interactions were part of nature, and that nature was of a lower order than culture. They correctly noted that the first social division of labor was between men and women, but wrongly equated this with sexual intercourse, suggesting that the division of labor in the family was “natural.” Accordingly, they concluded that the division of labor became “truly” significant only when a split between mental and manual labor appeared. They thus failed to incorporate gender relations and sexual systems into their theory of productive forces and social conflict.

Yet two elements in the methodology of Engels and Marx have always pointed the way to a richer

understanding of family life and family change. The first was their materialist insight that reproduction is both a product of historical forces and a historical force of its own. Connected to this was their recognition that the nature of productive work and the source of value are both historically specific. Marx's labor theory of value differed from that of his contemporaries not only in that he defined "value" as a uniquely capitalist phenomenon but also because he made his analysis of value a critique of capitalist social relations.

Under capitalism, Marx and Engels argued, only labor that is exchanged against capital is productive labor and produces value. If the good is not sold, however, its value cannot be realized, or even be said to exist. The social labor that went into making the good becomes trapped in the unsold commodity. In consequence, human cooperative endeavors are disguised and controlled by the exchange of things.

Meanwhile, the most important kinds of work that humans do—nurturing, for example, and many other "family"-type activities—produce no value under capitalism and are therefore marginalized and denigrated. The implications of this theoretical breakthrough for family analysis are profound.

The second contribution of Marx and Engels to the study of families was their dialectical insistence that social relationships, not just technological forces, lie at the heart of class analysis. In *The German Ideology* Marx suggests that "a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a `productive force.'"

Modes of cooperation—or coercion—are critical in defining class and understanding social change. And families, along with other socially constructed relationships such as race and gender, are central mechanisms for organizing cooperation and coercion. They are also sites of contradiction in the Marxist sense—places where inherent oppositions occur that are necessary to perpetuate a particular process or social system, and yet also undermine that process or social system.

These insights point the way toward a deeper and richer understanding of families and their meaning in the lives of working people today. Male privilege within the family is real, for example, but men support women and children at a level beyond which the latter could reproduce themselves in this society (as post-divorce statistics on poverty show) at the same time as they appropriate work and deference from them. An adequate theoretical account of the family must incorporate the tension between the family's role in maximizing the use of material resources for all its members and in legitimizing the unequal distribution of power and rewards, both internally and externally.

Such a theory must explore both the struggles within families over resources, power and autonomy and the ways in which families advance their members' interests or protect them against other groups. It must, in other words, explain the dualities of family life, as well as encompass the variations in family form and function among different classes and ethnic groups. Only such an approach will help us grasp the complex and contradictory processes that comprise the current "family crisis" in America.

Over the past thirty years, long-term changes in gender and age roles, cultural norms, and technology have interacted with the breakdown of the postwar wage and family bargain to erode the centrality of marriage as the main place where children are raised and intergenerational redistribution takes place. These changes have freed many individuals from repressive or toxic family situations.

At the same time, though, they are part of a general crisis in modern capitalism over how to care for dependencies and foster interpersonal obligations. People tend to feel that crisis first in their

families and their personal life. Often, they mistakenly but understandably attribute the pain associated with these changes to the breakdown of “traditional” family ties.

We cannot dismiss their feelings as “false consciousness.” In the current economic and social climate, the bourgeois family, especially as it has been democratized by the women’s movement, may seem like the highest quality of life to which many working people can aspire. At the same time, most working people live with tensions in their work and family lives that make it important for them to have the option to leave a family that cannot meet their needs. The intricate emotional and political ambivalence this creates cannot be solved by sloganeering. Family debates and struggles need the same nuanced attention to contradiction and contingency that Marx gave to analyzing a similarly complex political situation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

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\* Stephanie Coontz wrote *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992) and *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms With America’s Changing Families* (Basic Books, 1997).