

COMMENT

Marxism, feminism and women's liberation

Wednesday 27 February 2013, by [SMITH Sharon](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2013).

Sharon Smith, author of the soon-to-be-republished *Women and Socialism: Essays on Women's Liberation*, examines how the Marxist tradition has approached the struggle to end women's oppression, including its attitude toward other theories, in this article based on a talk given at the Socialism 2012 conference in Chicago.

INESSA ARMAND, the first leader of the women's department of the 1917 Russian Revolution, made the following observation: "If women's liberation is unthinkable without communism, then communism is unthinkable without women's liberation." That statement is a perfect summary of the relationship between the fight for both socialism and women's liberation—neither is possible without the other.

And the Marxist tradition has from its beginnings, with the writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, stood for the liberation of women. As early as the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels argued that the ruling class oppresses women, relegating them to second-class citizenship in society and within the family: "The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production...He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at [by communists] is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production."

Marx did not devote much space in *Capital* to describing the precise role of women's domestic labor under capitalism. Nor did he explore the origin of women's oppression in class society, although he did take extensive ethnological notes on the subject late in his life.

After Marx's death, Engels used some of Marx's ethnological notes to write the book *The origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which examined the rise of women's oppression as a product of the rise of class society and of the nuclear family. Whatever revisions have been necessary to update Engels' book, it was pathbreaking in its time as a contribution to understanding women's oppression, particularly since Engels was writing in Victorian England—which was hardly an age of enlightenment for the status of women.

Indeed, *The Origin* is noteworthy for the careful attention Engels gives to the personal aspects of women's oppression inside the family, including the extreme degradation suffered by women at the hands of their husbands, with a degree of inequality that had been unknown in pre-class societies. Engels called the rise of the nuclear family "the world historic defeat of the female sex." Although Marx's notes suggest that this world historic defeat began to occur over a longer period of time—predating, and leading to the rise of, class society—the end result is an enormous setback for women's equality to men.

Moreover, Engels explicitly argued that rape and violence against women were built in to the family at its beginning:

"The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she

became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children...In order to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights."

Engels also argued that the ideal of the monogamous family in class society is based upon a fundamental hypocrisy. From its very beginning, the family has been stamped "with its specific character of monogamy for the woman only, but not for the man." While acts of infidelity on the part of women were condemned, he said, are "considered honorable in a man, or, at the worst, a slight moral blemish which he cheerfully bears."

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SO ONE thing that stands out from the beginning of the Marxist tradition on women's liberation is that women's issues have never been viewed theoretically as only the concern of women, but were a concern of all revolutionary leaders, male and female. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote, "In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women." Likewise, Russian revolutionary V.I. Lenin commonly referred to women's oppression within the family as "domestic slavery."

The domestic slavery that Lenin referred to is central Marxist theory on women's oppression: The source of women's oppression lies in the role of the family as a reproducer of labor power for capitalism—and in women's unequal role inside the family. Whereas the ruling class family has historically functioned as an institution through which to pass on inheritance to future generations, with the rise of capitalism, the working class family took on the function of providing the system with a plentiful supply of labor.

This is a very cheap way for capitalists, though not for workers, to reproduce labor power, both in terms of replenishing the daily strength of the current labor force and also as a way of raising future generations of workers through adulthood. This setup places nearly the entire financial burden for raising children and maintaining households onto the shoulders of working-class family units—reliant primarily upon one or two parents' wages for survival, rather than expenditure by the government or the capitalist class.

The rise of the working-class family also began to sharply differentiate the character of the oppression suffered by women of different classes: The role of the upper-class woman is to produce offspring to inherit the family wealth, while the working-class woman functions to maintain today's and tomorrow's generation of workers in her own family—that is, to reproduce labor power for the system. Engels argued that the role of the "proletarian wife" meant "the wife became the head servant...[I]f she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out her family duties."

To this day, the competing demands of job and family are a major source of stress for all working mothers—but are especially so in working-class families, who cannot afford to hire others to help with laundry, housework, cooking and other domestic chores.

In order to prop up the family, ruling-class ideology compels both women and men to adhere to rigidly demarcated sex roles—including the ideal of the nurturing homemaker for women, subordinate to the family's male breadwinner—regardless of how little these ideals actually reflect the real lives of working-class people. Since the 1970s, the vast majority of women have been part of the labor force, yet these family ideals, and the assumption that women are better suited to domestic responsibilities within the family, live on. Women's caretaking role inside the family reduces their

status to second-class citizens in society as a whole, because their primary responsibility—and greatest contribution—is assumed to be servicing their individual families’ needs.

So understanding the role of the family is key to understanding women’s second-class citizenship in society, answering basic questions: Why do we still have no Equal Rights Amendment that would guarantee the most basic legal equality for women? Why are women relegated to the role of sex objects, subject to the approval or disapproval of men? Why are women today still fighting for the right to control their own bodies and reproductive lives? It began with the family, but the repercussions extend far beyond life inside the family.

The leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution understood not only the centrality of the family as the root of women’s oppression, but also the difficulties involved in realizing gender equality within the family as a precondition for women’s liberation in society as a whole. As Trotsky wrote in 1920:

“[I]n order to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an...arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in a normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics.”

The Russian Revolution also began to address on both a theoretical and practical level how the struggle against oppression must be integral to the struggle for socialism, arguing that the revolutionary party must be a “tribune of the oppressed.” Lenin made the following very succinct argument that the goal of revolutionary consciousness requires workers’ willingness to champion the interests of all the oppressed in society, as a part of the struggle for socialism:

“Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter what class is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other.”

THIS FORMULATION is extremely important to understanding the role of the socialist movement, not only in the class struggle, but also in fighting against all forms of oppression—and I’m hoping here to apply this formulation to address specifically women’s oppression, and what it means both theoretically and in practice.

What Lenin is highlighting in this quotation is that, while the capitalist system is based upon the exploitation of the working class—and class is the key division in society, between exploiter and exploited—at the same time, the system of capitalism also relies upon specific forms of oppression to maintain the system. And those forms of oppression affect people of all classes, not just workers.

A couple of familiar examples from today can illustrate this point pretty easily. First, racial profiling: Driving while Black or Brown is not a problem that affects only working-class Blacks and other racially oppressed people. The truth is that driving a top-of-the-line Mercedes dressed in an expensive suit does not keep you safe from being racially profiled and getting pulled over by the cops.

Let’s take another example, this time specifically about women: The glass ceiling. There is a simple reason why the upper echelons of the corporate and political world are still overwhelmingly white and male, and that is because of racism and sexism, pure and simple. We have a white, male inner circle running society, and Blacks and women just don’t get invited into it.

It would be wrong for us to say, “Who cares about those rich so-and-so’s—the oppression they suffer is nothing compared the suffering of the working class and the poor.” That may be true, but what Lenin is arguing here is that championing the rights of *all the oppressed* is crucial, not only to effectively fight against oppression, but it is also necessary to preparing the working class to run society in the interests of all of humanity.

How do we today reconcile these two aspects of Marxism: the role of revolutionaries in the self-emancipation of the working class and also as champions of all the oppressed, no matter which class is being affected?

It’s easy for us to embrace the cause of women workers forming unions and going on strike and demanding the right to equal pay. That struggle is a “no-brainer” to which we give our unqualified support. But the truth is that the world is much more complicated, and some of the most important movements against oppression have risen up as *non-class-based movements*, including feminism and the struggle for women’s equality.

I think the evidence shows, in particular, that the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s—including the women’s liberation movement, the gay liberation movement, the civil rights and Black Power movements—were powerful social struggles that had a transformative effect, both on mass consciousness in general and on working class consciousness in particular.

The advances of the 1960s women’s liberation movement have had a lasting effect on society, and that is exactly why the right wing has spent the last 40 years attacking all the gains of the women’s movement. It’s why feminism itself has been under attack in an effort to caricature feminists as a group of bitter, selfish, humorless women who either don’t like men or aren’t attractive to men, and so spend their lives steeped in a victimhood mentality, imagining that they see sexism everywhere they look.

So at this point in history, when feminism has been under sustained attack for the last 40 odd years with no end in sight, the last thing we should feel compelled to do is attack feminism. On the contrary, we need to defend feminism on principle, as a defense of women’s liberation and opposition to sexism. What is the definition of feminism? The advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social and economic equality to men.

UNFORTUNATELY, NOT all Marxists have, at all times, understood the need to defend feminism, and to appreciate the enormous accomplishments of the women’s movement, even after the 1960s era gave way to the backlash. This includes some in our own tradition, the International Socialist tradition, who, I would argue, fell into a reductionist approach to women’s liberation a few decades ago. And I would also argue that our own organization has borne the stamp of this training on a couple of key theoretical points, which I want to briefly summarize.

First, what is reductionism? In its purest form, reductionism is the notion that the class struggle will resolve the problem of sexism on its own, by revealing true class interests, as opposed to false consciousness. So this approach “reduces” issues of oppression to an issue of class. It’s also usually accompanied by a reiteration of the objective class interests of men in doing away with women’s oppression—without taking on the harder question: How do we confront sexism inside the working class?

Now, obviously this crude approach does not describe the IS tradition, which certainly since the 1960s women’s liberation movement has taken women’s liberation seriously as central to the

struggle for socialism.

However, I would argue that there was an adaptation in the direction of reductionism, and a tendency to minimize the oppression experienced by working-class women, which led to a mistaken theoretical litmus test involving the question of whether working class men “benefit” from women’s oppression. I also want to make it clear here that I am not simply finger-pointing here, since, to a lesser degree, we in the ISO adopted a similar approach.

There was a set of articles and a debate in the mid-1980s in a series of articles in the *International Socialism Journal* involving some of the key leaders of the Socialist Workers Party-Britain, which began to take up the issues I just described. I can’t summarize the entire debate, but I can just lay out some of the key points.

Let’s start with a 1984 article titled “Women’s Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism” by Chris Harman, a leading member of the SWP (I want to make clear that Chris Harman was one of the greatest Marxists of his time, who played a key role in training many of us in the ISO, so the issue I am about to describe represents a small, if significant, detraction from his otherwise enormous contribution to Marxism). In the article, Harman argues:

"In fact, however, the benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed...The benefits really come down to the question of housework. The question becomes the extent to which working class men benefit from women’s unpaid labor."

What the working class male gains directly in terms of labor from his wife can be roughly measured. It is the amount of labor he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day—a burden for a woman who has to do this work for two people after a day’s paid labor, but not a huge gain for the male worker."

It is worth noting that Harman’s comments above were describing the “marginal” benefits men experienced without children adding to women’s burden within the household.

Another British socialist, John Molyneux, responded to Harman’s argument, saying that male benefits are more than marginal: “Harman tells us that this is ‘a burden for the woman who has to do this work for two people after a day’s paid labor,’ so why is it not an important gain for the [male] worker not to have to do it?”

Molyneux’s arguments drew a sharp response from SWP Central Committee members Lindsey German and Sheila McGregor, and Molyneux replied equally sharply. The debate did not end until 1986. Lindsey German made a point of arguing, “[T]he differences and advantages that men have are by no means massive; nor are they even the substantial benefits that John claims. So there is no material basis for men being ‘bought off’ by these advantages.”

Sheila McGregor argued as if Molyneux was well on the road to abandoning Marxism entirely: “If we are to have an adequate theory of women’s oppression and how to fight it, we need to base ourselves on the Marxist tradition. John’s position, that working-class men do benefit from women’s oppression, is the first step toward departing from that tradition.”

Along the way in this debate, the position changed from what Harman had argued—that male benefits were “marginal”—to the claim that working class men do not benefit from women’s oppression at all—along with the claim that even the advantages men have over women inside the family are not “substantial.”

WHILE IT is true that capital is the primary beneficiary of women's oppression in the family and of all the sexist garbage used to reinforce women's second-class citizenship—and also that working-class men have an objective class interest in the liberation of women—I would also argue that posing the argument this way results in a tendency to minimize the severity of women's oppression and underplay the need to combat it inside the working class.

As a case in point, compare the arguments of the SWP with comments that Lenin himself made in 1920 in conversations with German revolutionary Clara Zetkin, *several years after the Russian Revolution*, when he spoke in detail about the obstacles to achieving women's liberation:

"Could there be any more palpable proof [of the continued oppression of women] than the common sight of a man calmly watching a woman wear herself out with trivial, monotonous, strength- and time-consuming work, such as her housework, and watching her spirit shrinking, her mind growing dull, her heartbeat growing faint, and her will growing slack?...Very few husbands, not even the proletarians, think of how much they could lighten the burdens and worries of their wives, or relieve them entirely, if they lent a hand in this" women's work. "But no, that would go against the" privilege and dignity of the husband." He demands that he have rest and comfort..."

We must root out the old slave owner's point of view, both in the party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, a task just as urgently necessary as the formation of a staff composed of comrades, men and women, with thorough theoretical and practical training for Party work among working women."

The Bolshevik Party, both before and after the revolution devoted considerable resources for outreach and education of women workers and peasants, through its women's department—while at the same time arguing against sexist attitudes of working-class men.

Alexandra Kollontai, who was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party and one its leading theoreticians on women's oppression, attended the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in 1917, where she called on working-class men to support equal pay for women workers. This is what she argued:

"The class-conscious worker must understand that the value of male labor is dependent on the value of female labor and that, by threatening to replace male labor with cheaper female workers, the capitalist can put pressure on men's wages. Only a lack of understanding could lead one to see this question as purely a"woman's issue."

So I would argue that today, our emphasis should be more in keeping with that of the theory and practice of the Bolsheviks, in which we do not attempt to minimize the degree of oppression faced by women—or any other oppressed group—inside the working class, but rather to make a serious effort on every front to combat it.

Furthermore, the truth is that feminism is a broad and multifaceted movement, with many different wings and many different theoretical foundations. To set up a straw figure of "feminism," based on its most bourgeois forms, knock it down, and then think our job is done intellectually does a disservice to the fight against women's oppression. There are important debates that have taken place between feminists that we have remained largely ignorant about that can be playing a role in advancing our understanding both of women's oppression and of Marxism itself.

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I AM not here arguing that we should embrace all wings of feminism uncritically or equally. There is one particular wing, in fact, that we should treat with outright hostility: bourgeois, or middle-class,

feminism. Ruling class and middle-class women do face oppression, but that doesn't mean that they can be entrusted with pursuing a strategy that will address the suffering of the vast majority of women, who are in the working class.

On the contrary, the rise of women in corporate management and the electoral arena has over the last 45 years institutionalized middle-class feminism in the form of organizations such as the National Organization for Women and the Feminist Majority Foundation, which unapologetically cater exclusively to the needs of the professional and managerial class of women.

This has given way since the 1990s to what is called "Power feminism." Feminist author Naomi Wolf best summarized this new approach in her 1994 book, *Fire with Fire*. In it, she coined the term "power feminism" as an alternative to what she called "victim feminism," which she said includes "old habits left over from the revolutionary left of the 1960s—such as reflexive anti-capitalism, an insider-outsider mentality, and an aversion to 'the system.'"

Wolf admitted that capitalism "does oppress the many for the few," but she argued, "enough money buys a woman out of a lot of sex oppression." That, in a nutshell, was Wolf's message: Women should embrace capitalism and get as much money and power for themselves as they can. She argued, bastardizing Marxism, "pending the 'revolution,' women are better off with the means of production in their own hands...Women's businesses can be the power cells of the 21st century."

In fact, Wolf embraces the class differences between women, arguing, "There are going to be times when woman-to-woman aggression is a healthy, even energizing corollary of our having reached full participation in society...Women are managing, criticizing and firing other women, and their employees sometimes, understandably, hate their guts."

No socialist or feminist should feel any compunction to embrace power feminism or any other middle-class brand of feminism. Bourgeois feminism is nothing new, and the Bolsheviks' approach to it is instructive for us today. Once again, Alexandra Kollontai laid out an approach that applies to the situation today. In a 1909 pamphlet titled "The Social Basis of the Woman Question," she spelled out why there could be no alliance between working-class and ruling-class women, despite aspects of their shared oppression:

"The women's world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps: the interests and aspirations of one group bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections to the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus, although both camps follow the general slogan of the "liberation of women," their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests and aspirations of its own class, which gives a specific class coloring to the targets and tasks it sets for itself..."

However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of society, without which the liberation of women cannot be complete."

There is a second wing of feminism that Marxists and socialist feminists should continue to reject outright, although it has not been prominent since the 1970s: Separatism, which insists that all working-class men share a system of patriarchy with all ruling-class men that oppresses women.

In contrast to the current use of the term patriarchy, which merely describes a system of sexism, separatism gave primacy to women's oppression over all other forms of oppression, including racism.

For example, the analysis of rape by Susan Brownmiller in her 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, reached openly racist conclusions in her account of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. The 14-year-old Till, visiting family in Jim Crow Mississippi that summer, committed the “crime” of whistling at a married white woman named Carolyn Bryant, as a teenage prank. Till was tortured and shot before his young body was dumped in the Tallahatchie River.

Despite Till’s lynching, Brownmiller described Till and his killer as sharing power, using an openly racist claim: “Rarely has one single case exposed so clearly as Till’s the underlying group male antagonisms over access to women... In concrete terms, the accessibility of all white women was on review.”

Other wings of feminism have a mixed record. Dual-systems theory adopted by some socialist feminists attempted to combine an analysis of both capitalism and patriarchy, but was largely unable to overcome the contradiction inherent in trying to battle these two parallel structures. One requires a struggle uniting men and women workers in a common fight against their common enemy in capitalism, whereas the other requires women of all classes to unite against their common enemy in the patriarchy—which itself is composed of men of all classes.

Third Wave feminism in the 1990s stripped the theory of patriarchy of its primacy in a conscious effort to give equal priority to the struggles against racism and for LGBT rights, which was an enormous step forward. But at the same time, Third Wavers fell into the postmodernist trap of individualism and a retreat from struggle—prioritizing changing lifestyle and language over building the kind of movements that could challenge the system.

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THE WING of feminism that has been given the least attention is that of socialist-feminists and Marxist-feminists—who I now realize have made the greatest contribution to advancing the theory of women’s oppression over the last several decades.

These feminists have been given short shrift on every front. During the reign of postmodernism, most postmodernists—including postmodernist feminists—rejected their contribution because these feminists embraced a unifying theory (Marxism). At the same time, they were ignored by many Marxists (including ourselves) simply because they were feminists. Only now are they getting the attention they deserve.

This group of feminists has been developing and expanding the Marxist understanding of the role women play in reproducing the working class as a service to the capitalist system. Taking the basic concepts that Marx laid out in *Capital* about the role of social reproduction—that is, the processes that sustain and reproduce the entire capitalist system over generations—feminists such as Lise Vogel (whose book *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* is soon to be republished by Historical Materialism and Haymarket Books) picked up where Marx left off and for the first time developed a sophisticated understanding of the role of domestic labor, using Marx’s concept of *necessary labor*.

I would like also to mention the contribution of Martha Gimenez, whose application of Marxism to women’s oppression has spanned decades. Like Vogel, Gimenez has played a role in debating other feminists on many crucial issues, including the claim that Marxism is reductionist because it regards the reproduction of labor power as a service performed for capital and not for men. Here is what Gimenez had to say in 2005:

The notion that under capitalism, the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction and, consequently, observable unequal relations between men and women is not a form of “economism”

or “class reductionism,” but the recognition of the complex network of macro-level effects, upon male-female relationships, of a mode of production driven by capital accumulation rather than by the goal of satisfying people’s needs. To argue otherwise, postulating the “mutual interaction” between the organization of production and the organization of reproduction, or giving causal primacy to the latter, is to overlook the theoretical significance of the overwhelming evidence documenting the capitalist subordination of reproduction to production.

These feminists have not only played a key role in advancing Marxist theory on women’s oppression, but they remind us that Marxism is a living, breathing theory that is still in the process of developing. And deepening Marxist and feminist theory means also deepening and expanding the potential for our future practice in combatting women’s oppression.

Finally, I think that it is worth emphasizing that we need not only Marxist and feminist theory, but also Marxist and feminist practice in the fight for women’s liberation. That practice must involve the building of a revolutionary party, because without a revolutionary socialist party, there can be no successful socialist revolution.

While a socialist revolution does not automatically liberate women, it creates the material conditions for doing so. And it is through the process of revolution at every stage, from first to last, that revolutionaries, in the tradition of the Bolshevik Party, have a crucial role to play in combating oppression, not only from above, but also inside the working class. There is no substitute for this process. Marx made this clear when he argued: “The revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown any other way, but because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the old crap and become fitted to found society anew.”

If the role of revolutionaries is indispensable, then it is also the case that we will be most effective not by minimizing the challenges we face in fighting sexism within the working class, but by acknowledging them and, on this basis, developing a strategy that aims to throw the weight of the entire working class behind the goal of women’s liberation.

Sharon Smith, January 31, 2013

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation>