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# **Zetkin and oppression: consistent method, flexible application - Another comment on John Riddell's article**

Monday 10 March 2014, by [TIETZE Tad](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2014).

**The following is a comment on my post, "Reading Zetkin in Context." [1].**

**John Riddell**

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John, I am unconvinced by your positions on both Zetkin's views and the issue of "context." On Zetkin's views, it seems to me that while she shifted some of her specific views over time, what she did across her political life was to try to understand how different oppressions and injustices were shaped by the central dynamics of capitalist society using the same general approach.

Take her celebrated 1896 speech, "Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious." [2] Here she doesn't write off the oppression of ruling class or middle class women; rather, she tries to show how common oppression of women (as women) plays out differently for women of different classes. We may find her formulations a little blunt today, and we may not agree with her reliance on Engels and Morgan's more problematic formulations, but she is grappling with a serious issue of how the totality of capitalist social relations affects legal, political and social aspects of oppression. As Marx made clear in "On The Jewish Question", the issue for revolutionaries is always how to go beyond mere political emancipation to social emancipation, and in this speech Zetkin seems to me to be critical of upper and middle class feminist outlooks precisely because they cannot resolve the social question.

The other delight on re-reading her speech is to discover how she historicises the emergence of "the woman question" as a separate question only under capitalism — not that oppression didn't exist in pre-capitalist societies, but that the structure of capitalist society is the first place that a real (to use the modern term) "feminist" politics is able to emerge. Grasping both what a massive step forward this is and its limits within what Marx called "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right" strikes me as a central message of hers, one that is not at all undercut by her later (Comintern-era) concern with winning over "middle layers".

This is all consistent with the description of Lenin's approach that Lise Vogel outlines in her *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Exploiting the tension between capitalism's ability to deliver formal equality while denying substantive equality, a system that also fails to deliver on formal equality because of the substantive (social) injustice built into its functioning as a whole. That is, the social interests of "middle layers" cannot be fully addressed within the limits of formal bourgeois*

equality and so revolutionaries can win them over by creatively linking workers' struggles for social emancipation with those of other subaltern sections of civil society. When she says, "We have no special tasks for the agitation among women," she doesn't invalidate her insights on oppression from earlier in her speech but, instead, recognises that the task for socialists is not simply to agree with basic political equality but to always and everywhere argue for a social solution to oppression. Part of that process is a struggle within the party and among women to win people to social emancipation.

On the issue of context, I don't think context shifts Zetkin's overall approach but serves to provide concrete political issues to which she applies a generally consistent method. In 1896 she is concerned with specific debates on "the woman question" inside an SPD that is already much less revolutionary than you imply, while in the post-WWI era she is concerned to steer the KPD and Comintern in a sensible direction on issues like dealing with the pull of reformist institutions on radicalising layers of the working class and other oppressed groups. Even when she (famously) grapples with the thorny controversy of the "workers' government" [3] you can see her suspicion towards attempts to reduce social struggles to the level of the (merely) bourgeois-political.

In terms of the context of the Second Wave movements of the 1960s and after, I think you are absolutely correct to point to the inconsistent or sometimes dire politics of the Stalinist movement on issues of oppression (although in countries like the USA one could argue that if Stalinism hadn't been so smashed up by McCarthyism the situation on the radical Left would've been better, because at least the Communists maintained some residue of a better politics). However, while it may be true in some places that the women's movement "had no alternative but to stand on its own", this was not the case in most Western countries with Marxist currents.

Rather, the tendency was more that the specific form of women's movement that sprung up in that era (a product of and reaction to the specific historical changes in women's lives during the long boom) was tailed by many Marxists who were not as clear as Zetkin on the issues I have broached, leading to later bust-ups and fragmentation under the pressure of politics that pointed away from forces that could deliver social emancipation. To argue this is not a matter of seeing "abstention" as the correct method, but of always fighting for social solutions to oppression within existing movements.

You go on to write that the women's movement possessed "independence in action from the ruling class and its servants", a decidedly odd characterisation of a global movement that was generally dominated by currents that saw the limits of emancipation in legal and political terms, even if they framed those demands in a radical way. This is not to devalue the big gains these movements won, but they rarely went beyond that "narrow horizon" — stopping well short of overturning the oppressive social relations that underpin bourgeois inequalities. Even if there was formal separation from ruling class personages, there was dramatically less independence from the logic of capitalist politics, and this (in my view) helps to explain why many radical activists were so easily co-opted into much more limited feminist projects in the neoliberal era.

I think that Zetkin's consistent approach, clearly based in Marx's own approach to politics, can be of great help in navigating the challenges posed by new struggles today — and assist us in posing anti-capitalist solutions to help those struggles go beyond what the system will allow.

**Tad Tietze**

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## **P.S.**

\* February 16, 2014:

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/zetkin-and-oppression-consistent-method-flexible-application/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 31024), [1910-1920s : Reading Clara Zetkin in context - On Women's struggles and Lindsey German's comment.](#)

[2] Available on ESSF (article 31295), [Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious.](#)

[3] <http://www.workersliberty.org/system/files/zetkin-wg-text-eng.pdf>