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The origins of the Bolshevik vision: Love unfettered, women free

It is a curious fact that with every great revolutionary movement the question of “free love” comes into the foreground.

*Frederick Engels, 1883*¹

[The family] will be sent to a museum of antiquities so that it can rest next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe, by the horsedrawn carriage, the steam engine, and the wired telephone.

*S. Ia. Vol'fson, 1929, Soviet sociologist*²

In October 1918, barely a year after the Bolsheviks had come to power, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet (VTsIK), the highest legislative body, ratified a complete Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship. The Code captured in law a revolutionary vision of social relations based on women's equality and the “withering away” (*otmiranie*) of the family. According to Alexander Goikhbarg, the young, idealistic author of the new Family Code, it prepared the way for a time when “the fetters of husband and wife” would become “obsolete.” The Code was accordingly constructed with its own obsolescence in mind. Goikhbarg wrote, “Proletarian power constructs its codes and all of its laws dialectically, so that every day of their existence undermines the need for their existence.” In short, the aim of law was “to make law superfluous.”³

Goikhbarg and his fellow revolutionaries fully expected not

¹ Frederick Engels, as cited in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Penguin Books, New York, 1975): 306.

² S. Ia. Vol'fson, *Sotsiologična braka i sem'i* (Minsk, 1929): 450.

³ A. G. Goikhbarg, “Pervyi Kodeks Zakonov RSFSR,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, 7 (1918): 4, 8, 9.

only marriage and the family to wither away, but the law and the state as well. Lenin had carefully analyzed the future of the state in his famous essay, *The State and Revolution*, completed in September 1917, merely a month before the Bolsheviks took power. Based on Marx's and Engels's widely scattered remarks on the nature of the state, the ideas in *The State and Revolution* eventually came to represent the more utopian, libertarian, and antistatist strand within the contradictory corpus of Lenin's own thought as well as subsequent Marxist theory. Arguing vigorously against reformism in the social democratic movement, Lenin held that victorious revolutionaries would have to smash the bourgeois state and create a new state in its place. Yet the new "dictatorship of the proletariat" would be for the vast majority democratic, its power mobilized solely to eliminate the old exploiters. Its aim, the suppression of a minority by the majority, would be "so easy, simple, and natural a task," that the people could "suppress the exploiters even with a very simple 'machine.'" In Lenin's words, "since the majority of the people *itself* suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' for suppression is no longer necessary! In this sense the state *begins to wither away*."⁴

The ideas in *The State and Revolution* influenced Bolshevik thinking well into the 1930s. Engels's famous remark, quoted prominently by Lenin, that the machinery of state would be placed "into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe,"⁵ was repeated almost verbatim in 1929 by S. Ia Vol'fson, a Soviet sociologist, in reference to the family. Jurists, social theorists, and activists provided challenging theoretical and historical analyses to support these views. In brief, the Bolsheviks believed that capitalism had created a new contradiction, felt most painfully by women, between the demands of work and the needs of family. As more and more women were forced to work for wages with the advent of industrialization, the conflict between the demands of production and reproduction resulted in high infant mortality, broken homes, neglected children, and chronic health problems. A glance through the filthy windows of any nineteenth-century Russian

⁴ V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution," *Selected Works*, Vol. 2 (Progress, Moscow, 1970): 352, 353, 317.

⁵ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (International, New York, 1972): 232.

factory dormitory provided ample support for their view. Women had entered the workforce, but they were still responsible for child rearing, cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending – the mindless drudgery of housework essential to the family. Women's household responsibilities prevented them from entering the public worlds of work, politics, and creative endeavor on an equal footing with men. Capitalism, according to the Bolsheviks, would never be able to provide a systematic solution to the double burden women shouldered.

The Bolsheviks argued that only socialism could resolve the contradiction between work and family. Under socialism, household labor would be transferred to the public sphere: The tasks performed by millions of individual unpaid women in their homes would be taken over by paid workers in communal dining rooms, laundries, and childcare centers. Women would be freed to enter the public sphere on an equal basis with men, unhampered by the duties of the home. At last women would be equally educated, waged, and able to pursue their own individual goals and development. Under such circumstances, marriage would become superfluous. Men and women would come together and separate as they wished, apart from the deforming pressures of economic dependency and need. Free union would gradually replace marriage as the state ceased to interfere in the union between the sexes. Parents, regardless of their marital status, would care for their children with the help of the state; the very concept of illegitimacy would become obsolete. The family, stripped of its previous social functions, would gradually wither away, leaving in its place fully autonomous, equal individuals free to choose their partners on the basis of love and mutual respect.

Throw out the household pots

In the heady months immediately following the Revolution, many Bolshevik theorists and activists predicted a rapid transition to the new social order. At a 1918 conference of women workers, Inessa Armand, the head of the Zhenotdel (Women's Department of the Party), declared with naive fervor, "The bourgeois order is being abolished. . . . Separate households are

harmful survivals that only delay and hinder new forms of distribution. They should be abolished.”⁶ The policies of war communism (1918–1921) contributed to the idea that new socialist forms would quickly supplant the old. State rationing, public dining halls, free food for children, and wages in kind all supported the optimistic assessment that household labor would soon vanish. P. I. Stuchka, the first People’s Commissar of Justice, later noted, “The period of war communism showed us one thing: a plan for the free family of the future when the family’s roles as a cell of production and consumption, as a juridical entity, as a social insurer, as a bastion of inequality, and as a unit for feeding and bringing up children would all disappear.”⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, one of the few female Bolshevik leaders and author of numerous works on women’s issues, optimistically surveyed the weakened state of the family at the end of the civil war and proclaimed it *already* outmoded: “In the present time, when social feeding has replaced individual consumption and become an independent branch of the people’s economy, not a single one of the economic bonds that created stability for the proletarian family for centuries remains.” The state had already assumed the upbringing and support of children, Kollontai explained, and once household labor was transferred to the realm of waged labor, nothing of the family would remain except a “psychological tie.” The institution of marriage had become irrelevant because it entailed “no economic or social tasks” and no longer needed “to be subject to the account, control, or leadership of the collective.”⁸

Kollontai’s enthusiasm may have been somewhat premature, but she was not alone in her thinking. Jurists, Party members, social planners, and women’s activists, among others, widely promulgated the notion throughout the 1920s that the family would

⁶ As remembered and quoted by Sophia Smidovich, “O Novom Kodekse Zakonov o Brake i Sem’e,” *Kommunistka*, 1 (1926): 45.

⁷ P. Stuchka, “Semeinoe Pravo,” *Revoliutsiia prava*, 1 (1925): 180.

⁸ A. Kollontai, “Sem’ia i Kommunizm,” *Kommunistka*, 7 (1920): 17, 18. On Kollontai and her contribution see Barbara Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist. The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979) and “Emancipation through Communism: The Ideology of A. M. Kollontai,” *Slavic Review*, 30 (1973): 323–338; Beatrice Farnsworth, *Alexandra Kollontai. Socialism, Feminism, and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1980).

soon wither away. Hundreds of pamphlets, books, and articles were published for academic and popular audiences on the creation of a "new life" under socialism.⁹ Discussions raged among young people. The family's sexual division of labor, legal foundation, moral credibility, and economic efficiency were all called into question. Although Party theorists shared the belief that the family would eventually wither away, they expressed numerous differences on family and social relations. The Party did not maintain a rigid orthodoxy and differences were freely expressed, especially regarding such contentious issues as sexual relations, child rearing, and the need for the family in the transition to socialism.

Given that the family was widely expected to wither away, the issue of how to organize household labor provoked extensive discussion. Lenin spoke and wrote repeatedly of the need to socialize housework, describing it as "the most unproductive, the most savage, and the most arduous work a woman can do." Sparing no harsh adjective, he wrote that "petty housework crushes" and "degrades" a woman, "chains her to the kitchen and the nursery" where "she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, and stultifying drudgery." Lenin obviously despised housework. He argued that "the real emancipation of women" must include not only legal equality, but "the wholesale transformation" of household into socialized labor.¹⁰

Kollontai, too, argued that under socialism all household tasks would be eliminated and consumption would cease to be individual and internal to the family. The private kitchen would be replaced by the public dining hall. Sewing, cleaning, and washing, like mining, metallurgy, and machine production, would become branches of the people's economy. The family, in Kollontai's estimation, constituted an inefficient use of labor, food, and fuel. "From the point of view of the people's economy," the family was "not only useless, but harmful."¹¹ And Evgeny Pre-

⁹ See, for example, the collection of articles gathered by Em. Iaroslavskii, *Voprosy zhizni i bor'by. Sbornik* (Molodaia Gvardiia, Leningrad, 1924.)

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women* (New York, 1934): 63, 69.

¹¹ A. Kollontai, "Tezisy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii," *Kommunistka*, 12–13 (1921): 29.

obrazhenskii, the well-known Soviet economist, noted that the traditional division of labor in the family prevented a woman from achieving real equality by placing "a burden on her that comes before all else." The only solution, according to Preobrazhenskii, was a "great public cauldron, replacing the household pot."¹²

Unlike modern feminists, who argue for a redivision of household tasks *within the family*, increasing men's share of domestic responsibilities, Bolshevik theorists sought to transfer housework to the public sphere. Preobrazhenskii expressed this difference crisply. "Our task does not consist of striving for justice in the division of labor between the sexes," he wrote, "Our task is to free men and women from petty household labor."¹³ The abolition of the family, rather than gender conflict within it, held the key to women's emancipation. The socialization of household labor would eliminate women's dependence on men and promote a new freedom in relations between the sexes. Trotsky declared that as soon as "washing [was] done by a public laundry, catering by a public restaurant, sewing by a public workshop," "the bond between husband and wife would be freed from everything external and accidental." New relationships, "compulsory for no one," would develop based on mutual feelings.¹⁴ The Soviet marital ideal of the 1920s was a partnership of equals, a union of comrades founded on mutual affection and united by common interests.¹⁵

Soviet theorists recognized that a companionate union required that women become the equals of men. The writer M. Shishkevich, offering advice to a broad audience of workers and peasants, remarked, "How often quarrels and fights occur because the spouses grow apart in their views. A husband reads a little, goes to a lecture, sees how others look at life. But a wife is with the kitchen pots all the time, gossiping with the neighbors."

¹² E. Preobrazhenskii, "Put'k Raskreposhcheniiu Zhenshchiny," *Kommunistka*, 7 (1920): 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Leon Trotsky, "From the Old Family to the New," *Pravda*, July 13, 1923, reprinted in his *Women and the Family* (Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970): 26.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the changing Soviet marital ideal, see Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship in the Soviet Union. Ideals and Practices* (Praeger, New York, 1984).

If women did not participate in cultural and political life, their relations with men could not be based on mutual respect. Invoking the ideal of companionate union, Shishkevich counseled his readers: "The participation of both spouses in public life eases mutual understanding, and develops respect toward the wife as an equal, a friend and a comrade."¹⁶ Soviet theorists foresaw relations based on "free union" or "free love." Lenin, it should be noted, strongly disliked these terms because of their association with bourgeois promiscuity. But he nonetheless held that without love, there was no basis for a relationship. "One cannot be a democrat and a socialist," he wrote, "without demanding full freedom of divorce."¹⁷

Yet how long were unions based on mutual feelings expected to last? For a day, a year, a lifetime? Soviet theorists differed in their answers. Some foresaw a free sexuality limited only by natural desire. Kollontai contended that morality, like the family, was historically constructed and therefore subject to change. "In nature there is neither morality nor immorality," she wrote. "The satisfaction of healthy and natural instinct only ceases to be normal when it transcends the limits established by hygiene." She explained, "The sexual act should be recognized as neither shameful nor sinful, but natural and legal, as much a manifestation of a healthy organism as the quenching of hunger or thirst." Lenin took a more conservative position, displaying his hide-bound Victorian prejudices in the very metaphor of his reply: "To be sure," he wrote, "thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person lie down in the gutter and drink from a puddle?"¹⁸

Semen Iakovlevich Vol'fson, a sociologist and professor of law, economy, and dialectical materialism, agreed with Kollontai, arguing that the duration of marriage would "be defined exclusively by the mutual inclination of the spouses." Affection and attraction would be the sole determinants of the duration of a relationship. Against Kautsky's prediction that the family would

¹⁶ M. Shishkevich, "Sem'ia i Brak v Usloviakh Novogo Byta," in *Sem'ia i brak v proshlom i nastoiashchem* (Moscow, 1925): 101–102.

¹⁷ See Lenin's exchange with Inessa Armand in Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women*, pp. 36–40, 42.

¹⁸ Kollontai, "Tesizy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii," p. 31; Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women*, p. 106.

be preserved under socialism as an “ethical unit,” Vol’fson snorted, “The family as an ‘ethical unit,’ deprived of its social and economic functions, is simply nonsense.”¹⁹

Others were more cautious in their approach to sexuality. Shishkevich agreed that “under the conditions of new life we will achieve full freedom of sexual union,” but he saw the need to limit sexual freedom during the transition period. As long as the state could not care for children and as long as sex entailed the possibility of pregnancy, men should not be freed of their responsibilities toward women. “If the question is resolved in favor of the sexual irresponsibility of men,” he wrote, “then there is no doubt that in our economic conditions, women and mothers will suffer.”²⁰ For women, fear of pregnancy was still the great stumbling block to the free expression of sexuality.

Lenin, too, stressed the social consequences of sexual relations, although he was deeply uncomfortable with speculations about sexuality in general, and considered such preoccupations idle and unproductive diversions. “I mistrust those who are always absorbed in the sex problem,” he told Clara Zetkin, “the way an Indian saint is absorbed in the contemplation of his navel.” Concerned about the consequences of free sexuality in a precontraceptive society, Lenin noted that an individual’s personal behavior assumed a new importance for the collective when children were involved. “It takes two people to make love,” he said, “but a third person, a new life, is likely to come into being. This deed has a social complexion and constitutes a duty to the community.”²¹

Clearly, the fate and upbringing of children was central to any discussion of sexuality. And here too, Soviet theorists differed. All vaguely agreed that eventually all children would be cared for by the state in public nurseries, childcare centers, and schools. Zinaida Tettenborn, an expert on illegitimacy and the rights of children, confidently declared: “Upbringing will be equal, the same for all children, and not one child will be in a worse position than any other.”²² Yet Soviet theorists remained

¹⁹ S. Ia. Vol’fson, *Sotsiologiia braka i sem’i*, p. 446.

²⁰ Shishkevich, p. 110.

²¹ Lenin, pp. 101, 106.

²² Zinaida Tettenborn, “Roditel’skie Prava v Pervom Kodekse Zakonov RSFSR,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, 1 (1919): 26, 27.

uncertain about how to implement this principled prescription. Were parents to retain a primary role in their children's upbringing? Or was the state to assume the parental role in its entirety? Some theorists argued that parents were not fit to bring up children: Parental ignorance and family egoism stunted children's development and narrowed their outlook. The state could do a far better job of rearing healthy citizens. Others held that the state would simply help parents to combine work with child rearing through an array of supplementary services.

V. Diushen, an educator, set out a painstakingly detailed blueprint in 1921 in which he argued that the egotistical spirit of the family was incompatible with socialist ethics. The family, he wrote, "opposes its interests to society's, and assumes that only those people related by blood deserve help and care." Mothers did children more harm than good, for even "mother-pedagogues" were incapable of approaching "their children with sufficient objectivity." Diushen constructed an elaborate plan for entire children's settlements and towns, populated by 800 to 1,000 children, aged 3 to 18. Houses would be separated by age and sex, headed by specially qualified pedagogues, and governed by a soviet composed of children, teachers, and technical personnel. Diushen even planned outings in which the children in the settlements would visit families to "see the seamy side of life."²³ Diushen's grim view of the parental role was shared by Goikhbarg, author of the Family Code. Goikhbarg encouraged parents to reject "their narrow and irrational love for their children." In his view, state upbringing would "provide vastly better results than the private, individual, unscientific, and irrational approach of individually 'loving' but ignorant parents."²⁴ Diushen sought to create democratic, communal organizations to counter the hierarchical, authoritarian relations within the family. And both he and Goikhbarg sought to substitute science for love, the "rationality" of educators for the "irrationality" of parents.

²³ V. Diushen, "Problemy Zhenskogo Kommunisticheskogo Dvizheniia – Problemy Sotsial'nogo Vospitaniia," *Kommunistka*, 12–13 (1921): 26–27.

²⁴ A. G. Goikhbarg, *Brachnoe, semeinoe, i opekunskoe pravo Sovetskoi respubliki* (Moscow, 1920): 5.

Kollontai was less critical of parents, but she too foresaw a greatly expanded role for the state. In her view, the attenuation of the parent–child bond was historically inevitable. Under capitalism economic want prevented parents from spending time with children. Forced to work at a young age, children quickly gained economic independence: “The authority of the parents weakens and obedience is at an end.” Alluding to Engels’s depiction of the family in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, she concluded, “Just as housework withers away, so the obligation of parents to their children withers away.” Communism would complete this process. “Society will feed, bring up, and educate the child,” Kollontai predicted, although parents would still preserve emotional bonds with their offspring. Women would have the opportunity to combine motherhood and work without worrying about the welfare of their children. According to Kollontai, a woman would give birth and then return “to the work she does for the large family-society.” Children would grow up in the creche or nursery, the kindergarten, the children’s colony, and the school under the care of experienced nurses and teachers. And whenever a mother wanted to see her child, “She only has to say the word.”²⁵

Tettenborn placed more emphasis on the parent–child bond, although she too imagined a large role for the state. Public upbringing, in her view, would not “remove parents from their children” but allow them more time together. Socialized child rearing would be organized democratically. Happily anticipating the future, she wrote, “We will then be in a completely democratic society. The upbringing committee will consist of parents – men and women – and their children.”²⁶

Soviet theorists thus differed on how large a role parents would play in their children’s upbringing, but they all agreed that the state would render substantial help and that motherhood would no longer keep women out of the workforce and public life. Most important, as the state assumed much of the burden of child rearing, the family would lose yet another social function that had historically provided its basis for existence. In the words of the jurist Iakov Brandenburgskii: “We are un-

²⁵ Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family,” in her *Selected Writings* (W. W. Norton, New York, London, 1977): 257–258, 134.

²⁶ Tettenborn, pp. 26, 27.

doubtedly moving toward the social feeding of children, to compulsory free schools, to the broadest social welfare at state expense." And as "the government develops and becomes stronger, as its help becomes all the more real, the broad family group will gradually disappear."²⁷

In sum, Soviet theorists held that the transition to capitalism had transformed the family by undermining its social and economic functions. Under socialism, it would wither away, and under communism, it would cease to exist entirely. In Kollontai's words, "The family – deprived of all economic tasks, not holding responsibility for a new generation, no longer providing women with the basic source of their existence – ceases to be a family. It narrows and is transformed into a union of the marital pair based on mutual contract."²⁸

The Bolsheviks thus offered a seemingly straightforward solution to women's oppression. Yet their prescriptions, despite an outward simplicity, rested on complex assumptions about the sources and meaning of liberation. First, they assumed that household labor should be removed, almost in its entirety, from the home. It would not be redivided along new gender lines within the family. The Bolsheviks did not challenge men to share in "women's work," but sought simply to transfer the tasks to the public domain. Although they frequently noted that men should "help" women at home, they were not deeply concerned with remaking gender roles within the family.

Second, they assumed that women would only be free if they entered the world of wage labor. Rather than reconsider the value society attached to the tasks women performed at home, they spurned domestic labor as the mind-numbing progenitor of political backwardness. Only a separate wage could offer women economic independence and access to a wider public world. If women were to be liberated economically and psychologically, they needed to become more like men, or more specifically, more like male workers.

Third, the Bolsheviks attached little importance to the powerful emotional bonds between parents and their children. They

²⁷ Ia. N. Brandenburgskii, *Kurs semeino-brachnogo prava* (Moscow, 1928): 20.

²⁸ Kollontai, "Tezisy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii," p. 29.

assumed that most of the necessary care for children, even infants, could be relegated to paid, public employees. They tended to slight the role of the mother–child bond in infant survival and early childhood development, although even a rudimentary acquaintance with the work of the prerevolutionary foundling homes would have revealed the shockingly low survival rates for infants in institutional settings and the obstacles to healthy child development.²⁹ In the views of many theorists, the problems posed by children appeared almost identical to those of housework. Their solutions therefore were roughly the same.

Fourth, the socialist vision of liberation held within it a certain tension between the individual and the collective or the state. Although the Bolsheviks advocated personal freedom for the individual and the elimination of religious and state authority in matters of sexual choice, they assumed that the state would take on the tasks of child rearing and household labor. Thus while Bolshevik ideology promoted the libertarian freedom of the individual, it also enlarged immeasurably the social role of the state by eliminating intermediary bodies like the family. Ideally, the individual and the collective stood in dialectical balance, the very freedom of the first assured by the increased care and responsibility of the second. In this sense, the vision of sexual freedom did not differ appreciably from the larger Marxian promise of individual creative fulfillment in the context of a widely socialized economy. Yet the ideal was subject to imbalance, and the tension between individual freedom and the powerful increase in state functions and control generated an increasingly savage struggle into the early 1930s.

Stripped of embellishment, the Bolshevik vision was thus based on four primary precepts: free union, women's emancipation through wage labor, the socialization of housework, and the withering away of the family. Each of these had its own distinct history, though they conjoined at different moments in time. The idea of free union developed first, surfacing in the Middle Ages, and again, in the seventeenth century, yet detached from any commitment to women's liberation. It was followed in the eighteenth century by debates on women's equality and a grow-

²⁹ For an excellent treatment of the prerevolutionary foundling homes, see David Ransel, *Mothers of Misery. Child Abandonment in Russia* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1988).

ing consciousness of women's oppression. In the nineteenth century, free union and women's emancipation were welded to demands for the socialization of household labor and the withering away of the family, all now supported by a larger emphasis on the state as the primary source of social welfare. Most of these ideas were born of and sustained by movements for a more just, communal social order. By tracing their origins and trajectories it will be possible to establish the intellectual foundations of Bolshevik thought on women and the family and to suggest what was new and original in the contribution of the generation of revolutionaries who came to power in 1917.

Free union

Throughout the Middle Ages, the church accused numerous sects of the heresies of libertinage and free union. In the twelfth century, the Brethren of the Free Spirit eagerly awaited a final stage in the world's history when men would be tutored directly by God. A hundred years later, French believers claimed that a man truly united with God was incapable of sin.³⁰ In the fourteenth century, the *beguines* and *beghards* of Germany, small groups who dedicated themselves to poverty and a simple communal life, were accused of promulgating the heresy of the Free Spirit, the notion that "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" and that people could practice sex without sin. This idea was given voice again by Martin Huska, a fifteenth-century Bohemian rebel who preached "Our Father who art in us" and who was burned for this heretical prayer in 1421. His most radical followers, the Adamites, were accused of imitating a false Edenite innocence by going naked, having sexual relations, and avowing their own sinlessness.³¹ Many of these sects also practiced a primitive communism and preached hatred of the wealth and power of the church.³² Yet while they often practiced collec-

³⁰ Walter Nigg, *The Heretics* (Knopf, New York, 1962): 226–236.

³¹ Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy. Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus* (Holmes and Meier, New York, 1977): 173–178, 322–323.

³² Karl Kautsky sees these sects as the direct forebears of modern socialists. See his *Communism in Central Europe at the Time of the Reformation* (Russell and Russell, New York, 1959).

tivism, their ideas about free union were based on notions of sinlessness and union with God, and were not intended to transform marriage and the family or to emancipate women.

Ideas of free union emerged again in the seventeenth century, sparked by the English Revolution and what one historian has called “the first modern sexual revolution.” Although here too, the idea of free union found its most vigorous promoters in the religious millenarian sects, it was accompanied by a strong critique of traditional marital patterns from both the lower and middle classes. By 1600, one-third of Britain’s population had lost access to land or a craft. Migrant wageworkers, expropriated peasants, and failed tradesmen had broken free of older peasant marital customs. With little prospect of ever establishing an independent household, their marital behavior was looser, often based on self-marriage and self-divorce.³³ Drawn to millenarian sects as well as radical antinomianism, these groups attacked older forms of custom from below.

At the same time, the rising businessmen and prosperous farmers who benefited from enclosure and the new opportunities in trade and production attacked popular culture from above. Deriding peasant practices as vulgar, they rejected older custom in favor of a new emphasis on the companionate couple. In the 1640s and 1650s, these two strands – antinomianism and puritanism – reinforced each other and united in their attack on the existing order.³⁴

The critiques of marriage spanned a gamut of alternatives from companionate union to free love. Puritan doctrine emphasized the idea of the companionate marriage in which the wife, still subordinate to the husband’s authority, would be more a “helpmeet” and an equal. Critical of public festivities, they advocated small private weddings and briefly instituted civil marriage (1653–1660) in the hope of gaining greater control over their children’s marital choices.³⁵ Other religious sects also rejected the marriage ceremony in favor of a simple declaration by the

³³ John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse. British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985): 102, 13, 99.

³⁴ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (Harper, New York, 1979) offers a different interpretation, noting that by 1640, allegiance to kinship networks had declined, turning inward toward the family, pp. 107, 109. Gillis, p. 102

³⁵ Gillis, pp. 82, 85, 55, 56, 86.

couple before the assembled congregation and practiced an analogous form of divorce. And while the Puritans sought stricter controls over marriage, other critics aimed to loosen restrictions. The poet John Milton spoke passionately in favor of the liberalization of divorce and others sought to limit the absolute patriarchal authority wielded by husbands and fathers. The Ranters, one of the most radical religious sects, went even further, preaching free love, the abolition of the family, and “casual sexual relations with a variety of partners.”³⁶ They celebrated sexuality, and like their medieval predecessors, denied that sex was sinful. Some raised the secular notion of marriage by contract, renewable by husband and wife annually. Abiezer Coppe, a Ranter and an Oxford scholar, found an enthusiastic audience among the poor for his fiery condemnations of monogamy and the nuclear family.³⁷ Various sects advocated an expansion of women’s rights based on their religious conviction of “fundamental natural rights.” Some sects permitted women to participate in church government and even to preach. The Quakers, emphasizing each individual’s privileged relationship to God, omitted from the marriage ceremony the wife’s vow to obey her husband.³⁸

Yet even among radicals and dissenters, the critique of the family and women’s oppression remained rudimentary. Gerard Winstanley and his radical Diggers reaffirmed the man’s place as head of the family and attacked the Ranters’ doctrine of free love. Winstanley argued that free love did little to improve the lot of women. “The mother and child begotten in this manner,” he wrote, “is like to have the worst of it, for the man will be gone and leave them . . . after he hath had his pleasure.” As Christopher Hill has noted, in the absence of effective birth control, “sexual freedom tended to be freedom for men only.”³⁹ Moreover, many of the radical sects never agreed to women’s equality and even the Levellers, who argued for “natural rights,” did not include women in their plans to extend the political franchise.⁴⁰

The critiques of the family that emerged in the mid-

³⁶ Christopher Durston, *The Family in the English Revolution* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989): 12.

³⁷ Gillis, pp. 102–103.

³⁸ Hill, pp. 308, 310, 312, 315; Durston, pp. 10, 12, 15, 16, 18–19, 20.

³⁹ Winstanley as quoted in Hill, p. 319.

⁴⁰ Durston, pp. 25, 26, 30; Gillis, p. 103.

seventeenth century were thus quite limited. The narrow acknowledgment of women's rights was rooted in the new religious idea of each individual's unmediated relationship to God. This idea had strong libertarian implications and it seriously challenged established church and state institutions. But it did not reject patriarchal rule within the family. Some religious sectaries expanded women's role within the church, but they did not offer a critique of women's economic dependence or oppression. The Puritan notion of companionate marriage mitigated women's subordination, but it did not spring from an impulse to liberate women. Justified on religious grounds ("The soul knows no difference of sex"), the idea of companionate union corresponded to the increasing importance of middling-sized households in which the wife served as "a junior partner" in a family-owned and operated business.⁴¹

If the Puritan idea of companionate union was rooted in the needs and aspirations of prosperous farmers and businessmen, the ideas of the Ranters, the most extreme critics of marriage and the family, were based on the practices of the mobile poor. Dispossessed peasants and impoverished craftsmen, having no property to bind them and forced to travel about to earn their keep, frequently joined together and separated by mutual consent through "self-marriage" and "self-divorce."⁴² But the practices of migrant workers did not constitute a dominant social force in the seventeenth century. Like the Ranters' preachings, they were more a harbinger of later radical ideas than a realistic program for a popular movement.

After the English Revolution, the twin strands of puritanism and antinomianism began to unravel. Puritan elites attempted to limit marriage to the economically independent and to exclude the poor. By the end of the eighteenth century, their emphasis on the narrow, companionate, accumulative family unit was widely accepted by all propertied classes regardless of religion. The radical religious sects, who rebelled against marriage fees, went underground. Their vision of the world as one great family had little appeal for the rising middle classes.⁴³

⁴¹ Hill, pp. 311, 306–307.

⁴² Gillis, p. 99.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 135, 100, 102.

Questioning women's nature

Throughout the eighteenth century, the growth of cottage or domestic industry had a significant impact on women's roles as the household economy was increasingly characterized by a combination of agriculture and manufacture.⁴⁴ The development of domestic industry undermined patriarchal authority and the gender division of labor, lowered the age of first marriage, and resulted in an increase in the birth rate. As earnings replaced property as the basis for forming a separate household, young people increasingly married for personal attraction, "without any thought to material considerations."⁴⁵ Women gained "a new economic citizenship" and greater standing in community politics.⁴⁶ In the English villages where cottage industry flourished, villagers favored simpler weddings in place of the large peasant celebrations. Radical ideas of marriage based

⁴⁴ In France, for example, fully 50 to 90 percent of the land holdings were insufficient to maintain a family in the eighteenth century. See Olwen Hufton, "Women, Work, and Marriage in Eighteenth Century France," in R. B. Outhwaite, ed., *Marriage and Society. Studies in the Social History of Marriage* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1981): 186–203. And for England, see Bridget Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth Century England* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989).

⁴⁵ Rudolf Braun, "The Impact of Cottage Industry on an Agricultural Population," in David Landes, ed., *The Rise of Capitalism* (Macmillan, New York, 1966): 58. A great deal of attention has been given to this process, known as protoindustrialization. See for example, Hans Medick, "The Protoindustrial Family Economy: The Structural Function of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism," *Social History*, 1 (1976): 291–315; David Levine, "Proto-Industrialization and Demographic Upheaval," in Leslie Moch, ed., *Essays on the Family and Historical Change* (Texas A & M University Press, College Station, 1983): 9–34; David Levine, "Industrialization and the Proletarian Family in England," *Past and Present*, 107 (May 1985): 168–203; Wolfram Fischer, "Rural Industrialization and Population Change," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 15, no. 2 (March 1973): 158–170.

⁴⁶ John Bohstedt, "The Myth of the Feminine Food Riot: Women as Proto-Citizens in English Community Politics, 1790–1810," in Harriet Applewhite, Darline Levy, eds., *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1990); 34, 35.

on mutual feeling rather than property had a strong appeal to rural and urban plebeian groups who were already practicing more “flexible” forms of marriage.⁴⁷

The plebeian challenge to patriarchal authority from below was paralleled by a philosophical challenge from above as debates over women and the family engaged the free thinkers of the Enlightenment. Although the philosophes were not concerned directly with women’s liberation, they framed the discussion of women’s roles in a wholly new way by opening up the questions of gender difference and women’s potential for equality. Unlike the religious radicals of the seventeenth century, the philosophes did not base their thinking on the individual’s special relationship to God but on the role of education and the environment in shaping the potential innate in every (male) human being. The notion that education could play a critical role in creating human personality logically led many of the philosophes to question sexual differences and the “feminine character.”⁴⁸

While much of the philosophes’ thinking was new, their conclusions remained generally conservative. Diderot, for example, criticized many of the institutions and customs that held women back, but he also believed that women were innately prone to hysteria, incapable of sustained mental concentration, and ultimately unable to achieve genius. D’Holbach held that women were incapable of reason, justice, or abstract thought. Most of the philosophes emphasized an exclusively domestic role for women and denied the ultimate possibility of equality.⁴⁹

Like the Puritans, the philosophes advocated an essentially middle-class ideal of marriage based on monogamy, mutual affection, and companionship. Unlike the Puritans, however, they

⁴⁷ John Gillis, “Peasant, Plebeian, and Proletarian Marriage in Britain, 1600–1900,” in David Levine, ed., *Proletarianization and Family History* (Academic Press, New York, 1984): 138–150.

⁴⁸ Katherine Clinton, “Femme et Philosophe: Enlightenment Origins of Feminism,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 8 (1975).

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Gardner, “The Philosophes and Women: Sensationalism and Sentiment,” and P. D. Jimack, “The Paradox of Sophie and Julie: Contemporary Responses to Rousseau’s Ideal Wife and Ideal Mother,” in E. Jacobs, W. Barber, J. Block, F. Leakey, E. LeBreton, eds., *Women and Society in Eighteenth Century France: Essays in Honor of John Stephenson Spink*, (Athlone Press, London, 1979): 21–24, 152–153.

placed less emphasis on women's subordination to men, although their views of marriage were still molded largely by male needs. Rousseau's ideal wife was predicated on his "rational" assessment of the ideal man's requirements, and Helvetius's reforms of marital law and sexual mores were undertaken with male interests in mind.⁵⁰ Their critique of marriage, however, was secular. And like the new plebeian practices arising among workers in cottage industry, they too, challenged a "divinely ordered patriarchy."⁵¹

At their most radical, the philosophes questioned the "natural" superiority of men and argued for broader educational opportunities for women. Voltaire and Diderot both challenged women's legal inequality and Montesquieu argued that the "feminine character" was not innate but the result of poor education and limited opportunity. By raising the idea of human potential, these thinkers opened the way to new conceptions of citizenship and political rights. A few argued for civil equality for all, male and female, although none seriously challenged the institutions of marriage, family, or the gender division of labor.⁵² The philosophes were mainly concerned with the corruption of such female "virtues" as simplicity, frugality, and domesticity by an atmosphere of frivolity and decadence. Yet their critique, by its very nature, was confined to the "faults" of aristocratic women, the only group who had the luxury of such corruption.⁵³

Although many historians agreed that the "age of light" left women in the dark, in fact, the ideas of the philosophes were more or less congruent with women's relationship to the prevailing mode of production.⁵⁴ The philosophes were incapable of deeply questioning women's roles because no large-scale eco-

⁵⁰ Clinton, pp. 291–295; Jimack, p. 152.

⁵¹ Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States, 1780–1860* (Macmillan, New York, 1985): 4.

⁵² For a more favorable assessment of the philosophes' attitudes toward women, see Clinton, and Sylvana Tomaselli, "The Enlightenment Debate on Women," *History Workshop Journal*, 20 (1985).

⁵³ See Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1988) for the extension of this argument to republican ideology.

⁵⁴ Abby R. Kleinbaum, "Women in the Age of Light," in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible. Women in European History* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1977): 233.

conomic disruption had occurred in the balance of production and reproduction. Despite the changes spurred by the growth of domestic industry throughout the eighteenth century, the household was still the primary unit of production, and the vast majority of women in the countryside and the towns were firmly integrated into the family economy. Women engaged in a variety of crafts as a result of market penetration in the countryside, but these tasks were still performed within the home around the traditional work of farming, child rearing, cleaning, spinning, and mending. On the eve of the French Revolution, fully 85 percent of the population were peasants, and even in the cities, few women worked apart from their husbands or families; women's work remained an extension of work within the family.⁵⁵ The ideas of the philosophes thus reflected a world in which capitalism and wage labor had yet to shatter the division of labor within the family by involving large numbers of women in paid work outside the home. The contradiction between production and reproduction remained in the future, and it was therefore not surprising that the philosophes did not address themselves to its resolution.

The limited expressions of feminism within the French Revolution demonstrated that demands for women's emancipation could not be successful as long as the household retained a primary role in production. Women simply had no economic options outside the family, for a single woman could not survive on her wages alone.⁵⁶ Although Condorcet and other pamphleteers called for equal rights for women, women never organized as a separate constituency in the French Revolution to advance a self-consciously feminist program. There were a few maverick voices – several women's newspapers demanded more civil rights for women and limited participation in the political process, and Olympe de Gouges penned her famous *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen* – but despite their potential constituency, these feminist voices represented “a minority inter-

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Women and Work,” in Samia Spencer, ed., *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984), and Rendall's chapter, “Work and Organization,” p. 150.

⁵⁶ Candice Proctor, *Women, Equality, and the French Revolution* (Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1990): 70.

est.” The cahiers of 1789 contained a few specifically female grievances, but these were rare, never debated nor even seriously discussed.⁵⁷

Women in the French Revolution were active primarily on behalf of their class rather than their sex. They marched, rioted, formed women’s clubs, and joined the army, but not as feminists with a clear program for women’s rights. Political ferment did open new possibilities for women’s participation, and for a brief period in the spring of 1792, women actively promulgated a concept of female citizenship based on their right to bear arms.⁵⁸ The women of the laboring classes gave tremendous support to the Revolution, but their activism, like their work, was still powerfully conditioned by their roles within the family. Urban women had long been responsible for supplementing their husbands’ wages, and their participation in the bread riots grew directly out of their roles as foragers and providers for their families. In Olwyn Hufton’s words, “The bread riot was maternal terrain.”⁵⁹

The language of natural rights and republicanism did lead to a reexamination of the political and educational limits placed on women, but the dominant voices of the revolutionary era – male and female – still conceived of republican motherhood as the greatest service a woman could render the revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, considered by many to mark the beginning of modern feminist thought, advocated expanded opportunities for women so they could become better wives and mothers. Wollstonecraft still adhered to clearly

⁵⁷ Jane Abray, “Feminism in the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review*, 80 (1975): 59, 47; Ruth Graham, “Loaves and Liberty,” in *Becoming Visible*, p. 238–242; Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, “Women, Democracy, and Revolution in Paris,” in Spencer, ed., *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, pp. 64–67.

⁵⁸ Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, “Women, Radicalization, and the Fall of the French Monarchy,” in Applewhite and Levy, eds., p. 90; see also Dominique Godineau, “Masculine and Feminine Political Practice during the French Revolution,” *ibid.*, for argument that women did try to gain acceptance as citizens through the right to vote and bear arms.

⁵⁹ Olwyn Hufton, “Women in Revolution, 1789–1796,” *Past and Present*, 53 (1971): 94. For a similar argument on women’s role in food riots in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Rendall, pp. 200–203.

demarcated gender roles and a strict division of labor. In general, even the most radically feminist writers of the period were unable to “envision a convincing, liberated female character.”⁶⁰ The idea of republican motherhood opened a new vista of education, but it did little to free women from their cramped domestic confines. Both conservatives and republicans emphasized domesticity for women, and women made few advances into a larger public and political realm.⁶¹

Ultimately, the French Revolution accomplished little for women in general and even less for the women of the poor. The government closed the independent women’s clubs in 1793 and banned women’s admission to popular assemblies soon after. Many of the Revolution’s new legal freedoms, including simplified divorce, rights for illegitimate children, and expanded property rights for women, were swept away by Napoleon’s Civil Code in 1804. At no stage had the Revolution enfranchised women politically or granted them civil rights.⁶² By 1796, as the country slid from famine into mass starvation, many women who had actively participated in the Revolution began to turn against it.⁶³

The French Revolution produced few concrete gains for women less because of the persistent efforts of men to exclude them than because of women’s lack of organization on their own behalf. They were active but never constituted “an autonomous force.” In one historian’s words, “France’s small-scale, home-based economy needed middle class and working class women to contribute . . . to their families. Women were not yet a large, independent group in the working class.” Ordinary women did not respond to the language of feminism, for neither its “words nor actions” “made any sense.”⁶⁴ Yet as capitalism began to

⁶⁰ Katharine Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1982): 183–189, 246.

⁶¹ Rendall, pp. 68, 70.

⁶² Roderick Phillips, “Women’s Emancipation, the Family, and Social Change in Eighteenth Century France,” *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1974); Adrienne Rogers, “Women and the Law,” in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*; Mary Johnson, “Old Wine in New Bottles: Institutional Change for Women of the People during the French Revolution,” in Carol Berkin, Clara Lovett, eds., *Women, War and Revolution* (Holmes and Meier, New York, London, 1980).

⁶³ Hufton, pp. 102–103. ⁶⁴ Graham, p. 252; Abray, p. 59.

transform domestic relations, and women began to enter the workforce, movements of working people were forced to wrestle with women's new roles as independent wage earners. Slowly a new vision of women's liberation began to take shape.

Socialize and communalize

By the early nineteenth century, workers in both Britain and France were increasingly resorting to the practice of self-marriage or free union. Many simply could not afford to marry, and large numbers simply postponed marriage and lived together. In France, many workers, particularly in the metal industry, refused marriage on principle. Licenses were expensive and anticlericalism rampant.⁶⁵ In England, sexual and religious nonconformity was also widespread. The early industrial centers were hotbeds of hostility toward the clergy and their marriage fees. In many cities, anticlericalism took a radical, even socialist form. Painite free thinkers, feminists, and socialists fiercely debated the institution of marriage, expressing what many workers had been practicing for several decades.⁶⁶

Utopian schemes for alternative communities proliferated throughout Europe and America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Movements based on the ideas of St. Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen strongly appealed to workers and artisans who were already practicing less rigid forms of marriage.⁶⁷ Many of the utopians, like their millenarian predecessors, advocated ideas of free union, but for the first time these ideas were linked to plans for socializing the household and emancipating women. In France, Prosper Enfantin, a charismatic quasi-religious figure, began popularizing the work of the utopian theorist St. Simon. Although St. Simon had written almost nothing about women, Enfantin founded a group – soon “a religion” – that focused much attention on women's equality.

⁶⁵ Rendall, p. 194. ⁶⁶ Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, p. 192.

⁶⁷ John Gillis, “Peasant, Plebeian, and Proletarian Marriage in Britain, 1600–1900,” p. 150, writes “when the Owenites experimented with collective living arrangements and advocated the freedom to divorce they were not building on elite values but on well-established plebeian practices.”

Enfantin himself was a strong believer in clearly defined sex roles: Man represented reflection; woman, sentiment. But he prized women's emotional contribution and argued therefore for their full participation in the public sphere. Enfantin eventually expelled the women from the leadership or "hierarchy" of his group, leaving France for Egypt on a mystical quest for the female messiah. Yet his group gave rise to a breakaway faction of women who published, for a brief time, a feminist paper advocating free love, the abolition of illegitimacy, and the socialization of child rearing. Unlike male utopians, however, whose careers prospered in the 1830s and 1840s, the feminists found it almost impossible to survive financially outside of marriage. Extreme poverty led many to reconsider their earlier ideas about free love.⁶⁸

If Enfantin's program for women proved largely abortive, Charles Fourier's elaborate plans for alternative communities or phalanxes had somewhat greater success. Fourier's ideas drew advocates throughout Europe and America, and over forty Fourier-inspired communities appeared in America between 1840 and 1860.⁶⁹ American Associationist literature proclaimed women equal to men, yet like the St. Simonians, most Associationists affirmed traditional gender roles and division of labor. Women were "the beautifiers, spiritualizers, and sympathizers." Associationists condemned the individual household, yet did not challenge traditional relations between the sexes. In the phalanxes, household duties like cooking, laundry, and child care were socialized, but they were still performed, albeit communally, by women. Women were "equal" but still not the same as men. Fourierists assumed that women's innate character would naturally incline them toward domestic work. Thus the inequalities between men and women in society at large were reproduced in the phalanxes: Women were consigned to domestic work, were accorded little political power, and were paid less

⁶⁸ Claire Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1984): 41–83. On the St. Simonians, see also Robert Carlisle, *The Proffered Crown. Saint Simonianism and the Doctrine of Hope* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987).

⁶⁹ Robert Lauer, Jeanette Lauer, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sex in Utopian Communities* (Scarecrow Press, N.J., 1983): 37.

than men. The constitutions of some phalanxes actually stipulated that women receive only a fixed percentage of the male wage; in one case, the women's maximum was the men's minimum.⁷⁰

In Britain, Robert Owen, a utopian theorist and organizer, built a workers' movement aimed at creating worker-owned and -managed shops. After a series of bitter strikes in 1834, Owen shied away from class-based activism and turned to the creation of utopian communities to be built according to his own blueprint. The communities eventually collapsed amid fighting, financial difficulty, and Owen's own growing antidemocratic, anti-worker sentiments.⁷¹ But despite the dismal record of the communities, the ideas of Owenism had a tremendous impact on working men and women throughout the country and abroad.

Between 1825 and 1845, Owenites lectured and wrote extensively on the position of women. Owenites promulgated the ideas of "moral" marriage, simple, nonreligious vows, and cheap, easy divorce. Although they criticized patriarchal power, like the Associationists, they rejected the family less for its gender relations than its antisocial nature. In Owen's new society, living arrangements would be fully collectivized and housework performed on a communal rotating basis. Plans included separate rooms for all adults, married or single, dormitories for children, and common rooms for dining, socializing, and group activities. The Bolsheviks would later adopt an almost identical critique of the family and blueprint for communal life. Yet the Owenites, like the Associationists, did little to overturn or reform the traditional gender division of labor. Housework and child care was to be rotated only among women, not shared by all. And by and large, Owenite women fared as poorly as their

⁷⁰ Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative. Fourierism in Nineteenth Century America* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991): 130–131, 205–206, 209. Guarneri provides an insightful and detailed account of women's treatment.

⁷¹ The following section on Owenism is based largely on the work of Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Pantheon, New York, 1983). See also Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, pp. 224–228.

Associationist counterparts: communalizing individual tasks frequently created more, not less work.⁷²

After 1840, Owenites began to recognize that it was impossible to change the institution of marriage without restructuring the prevailing system of property. In part, this recognition was prompted by protest from women who were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of free union or “moral marriage.” The Owenite position on marriage began to splinter into a number of competing views. One Owenite editor warned that “moral Marriage” offered few protections to women. Without legal constraints men would always be tempted to desert. Owenite feminists, particularly among the poor, took a less celebratory view of unfettered sexuality than their male counterparts. Always conscious of the costs of unwanted pregnancy, they recognized the truth of one Owenite’s assertion that “a moral marriage is not so much an emancipation of woman as an emancipation of man.” This assertion had been noted before, by critics of the Ranters and the St. Simonian feminists, and it would be noted again, by Russian radical women in the nineteenth century and Soviet women in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1840s, however, the debate was still largely defined by men as the church battled against Owenite sexual libertarians. Women’s interests were not well served by either position. The absence of an independent female voice within Owenism ultimately aided the church in reasserting its traditional, conservative view of marriage.⁷³

The idea of women’s independence – economic, social, sexual – was still relatively undeveloped within utopian socialism despite its basic affirmation of equality. Yet the utopians clearly differed from both the religious communitarians and the philosophers in their emphasis on collectivity and equality. The 1830s and 1840s marked the beginning of a great change in the industrial labor force as women began entering the world of waged work outside the household. The ideas of utopian socialism took shape within a world where the family was being transformed and women were gaining a new economic independence. Workers’ struggles to come to terms with female labor provided

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 37–40, 48–49, 247–249. ⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 207–216.

an enormous spur to movements for women's equality as well as a socialist vision of women's liberation.

Challenging the sexual division of labor

The initial reaction of male workers to women's entrance into the labor force, in England as well as other countries, was actively hostile. Women began entering the tailoring trades in England during the Napoleonic War, diverting work from the older workshops and undermining the control male workers had won over hiring, wages, and work organization. Men rapidly began organizing to keep women out of the trades, arguing that women workers drove wages down and made it impossible for a man to support a family. They launched major strikes in 1827 and 1830 designed in part to exclude women from work. Employers used women as strikebreakers, and by the late 1830s, they had successfully broken craft control of the tailoring industry.⁷⁴

In France, male tailors fought similar battles to exclude women. As the ready-made trade began undercutting the power of the organized crafts, both master tailors and employees organized against piecework and female labor. Men saw women's labor as a sharp "threat to domestic stability and security."⁷⁵ Flora Tristan (1803–1844), a feminist and socialist, launched an appeal on behalf of women workers, advocating equal pay and the right to enter male trades. She was met by fierce hostility from artisans and skilled workers who claimed that women would be better off at home.⁷⁶

The new phenomenon of female labor outside the home provoked tremendous bitterness and confusion in all trades for it turned the workers' world upside down. Men and women fiercely competed for jobs as women replaced men for lower wages. Women abandoned their traditional family duties for

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 102–117. ⁷⁵ Rendall, pp. 163, 166, 168.

⁷⁶ Joan Moon, "Feminism and Socialism: The Utopian Synthesis of Flora Tristan," in Marilyn Boxer, Jean Quataert, eds., *Socialist Women. European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century* (Elsevier, New York, 1978).

waged work, frequently leaving an angry, unemployed husband at home to mind the baby and stir the soup. As wages fell, even women with working husbands were forced to find work. Men began to organize against women and to raise the demand for a "family wage." Their reactions, later termed "sexual Toryism" or "proletarian antifeminism," deemed women's entrance into the workforce "an inversion of the order of nature." And although many women retorted that they had no choice but to work, others supported the call for a family wage, shrinking from the prospect of combining full-time waged work with household labor.⁷⁷ Craft unions mounted a series of losing battles in an attempt to turn back the clock, and demands for a family wage could be heard throughout Europe as late as World War I.

The first challenge to the sexual division of labor, however, did not come from liberal feminists, who were largely unconcerned with the problems of workers, but from socialists, whose constituents were coping with the vast disruptions created by female labor. Liberal feminists, taken up with educational, civil, and political rights, and by religion and philanthropy, did little to question women's domestic role. Even John Stuart Mill, in his famous *The Subjugation of Women* (1869), argued that within the "most suitable division of labor," men earned the income and women managed the domestic expenses. He never considered that a large number of working-class women had no choice but to work.⁷⁸ By and large, the liberal feminists of the nineteenth century "identified most closely with single, educated women."

⁷⁷ Barbara Taylor calls this response by male workers "sexual Toryism." See pp. 101, 111–112. Werner Thonessen calls it "proletarian anti-feminism" in his *The Emancipation of Women. The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social Democracy, 1863–1933* (Pluto Press, Frankfurt am Main, 1973): 16. Male workers sought to increase male wages and decrease male unemployment by excluding women from the workforce and pushing them back into traditional domestic roles. These male demands were heard throughout the industrializing countries in the nineteenth century and were a response to employers who increasingly substituted women for men and paid them lower wages. The phenomenon was recognized by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (New York, 1975). Male workers believed that by excluding women, they could keep wages high enough to support a family.

⁷⁸ Rendall, p. 287.

They sought to extend “the sexual division of labor into the capitalist economy” by emphasizing women’s domestic proclivities and expanding their share of the female-dominated service sector.⁷⁹

Socialist theorists and organizers, on the other hand, were forced to confront the problems created by the female labor in the workplace and the home. Initially bewildered, they floundered for years in an attempt to devise a solution. Even Marx and Engels, who offered the most penetrating insights into the transformative power of capitalism, were initially bereft of analysis or strategy. Their period of confusion, however, was relatively brief. They quickly came to see that the extensive employment of female labor was inevitable and irreversible, and in doing so they mounted the first serious theoretical challenge to the gender division of labor. Arguing against strategies based on proletarian antifeminism, their work had enormous impact on the European labor movement and eventually provided the essential framework for Bolshevik thinking about women and the family. Although many of their ideas were similar to those of the utopian socialists, their analysis of the origins and development of women’s oppression was entirely new and unprecedented.

Marxism and women

The first Marxist work to engage the subject of women and work directly was Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class of England*, written in 1844. While the book dealt at length with the effects of capitalism on the family, it lacked a genuine theoretical analysis and stood primarily as a powerful moral indictment of industrial practices. One of Engels’s main themes concerned the introduction of new machinery and the increasing substitution of women and children for male workers for a fraction of men’s wages. Although Engels viewed this process as “inevitable,” he remained deeply concerned about its effects on women and the family. Nursing infants sickened and starved at home while their mothers’ swollen breasts dripped milk at the machines. Confined to unnatural positions throughout the long working day, women

⁷⁹ Rendall, pp. 186, 183, 184.

developed a variety of grotesque occupational malformations. Pregnant women, fined for sitting down to rest, developed horrible varicosities and often worked “up to the hour of delivery” for fear they would lose their wages and be replaced. Engels noted that “the case is none too rare of their being delivered in the factory among the machinery.”⁸⁰

In his stark exposé of the lives of working women, Engels intuitively grasped the contradiction between capitalist production and family stability. He was quick to perceive the “total neglect of children” when both parents worked twelve to thirteen hours a day in the mill. “The employment of women,” he noted, “at once breaks up the family.” Summarizing the effect of industry on the family, Engels cited the long hours women spent at work, the neglect of housework and children, demoralization, a growing indifference to family life, men’s inability to find work, the early “emancipation of children,” and the reversal of gender roles. Capitalism, in his view, was destroying the family.⁸¹

Engels saw the process as an inevitable part of economic development, but he was unable to move beyond an angry condemnation of the exploitation of female labor. Groping for an analysis, he advanced two opposing perspectives on the dissolution of the family. On the one hand, he described the inversion of family roles – husband as dependent, wife as breadwinner – with great moral indignation. His thinking still reflected “conventional 19th century assumptions” and was quite similar to the proletarian antifeminism of male workers themselves.⁸² On the other hand, he questioned his own condemnation of this gender role reversal. He noted tentatively, “If the reign of the wife over the husband as inevitably brought about by the factory system is inhuman, the pristine rule of the husband over the wife must have been inhuman too.”⁸³ Engels thus accepted a “natural”

⁸⁰ Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, 431, 497, 483, 452.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 406, 438, 489, 497.

⁸² Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (N.J., 1983): 46. Engels’s nineteenth-century assumptions about “natural” gender roles are present throughout *Condition of the Working Class in England*. Discussing the substitution of male by female labor, he wrote, “this condition which unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow on the man true womanliness or the woman true manliness – this condition . . . degrades in the most shameful way both sexes,” p. 439.

⁸³ Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, p. 439.

division of labor based on woman as homemaker, but he was beginning to question both the nature and the future of this division.

Within a year, Marx and Engels took a great leap in their thinking on women and the division of labor. Formulating a general theory of historical development in *The German Ideology* (1845–1846), they began to question the very idea of a “natural” division of labor. Here they first posited the production of material life and “the relation between men and women, parents and children, the family” as the basic premises of human existence. Outlining their materialist conception of history, they discussed the relationship between the basic stages of production, property, and the sexual or so-called natural division of labor. They suggested that the family was more than a set of natural or biological relations, but took a social form that corresponded to the mode of production. They insisted that the family must be treated empirically at all stages of history, not as an abstract concept. They wrote, “The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation.”⁸⁴

Their idea of the family as a mutable social form corresponding to a given mode of production was an enormous advance over prevailing notions of the family as a natural entity. Yet their twofold conception of the family – as a set of both natural and social relations – created a contradiction in *The German Ideology* that Marx and Engels were as yet unable to resolve. The contradiction was most clearly expressed in their effort to formulate a theoretical and historical explanation for women’s oppression. According to Marx and Engels, the social division of labor in the tribal stage was essentially “a further extension of the natural division of labor existing in the family.” In this early tribal period, a natural or biological division of labor prevailed, based on the biological differences between men and women, or more specifically, on women’s maternal function.

According to this early formulation, women’s oppression emerged from the “slavery latent in the family” that developed gradually with “the increase in population, the growth of wants, and the extension of external intercourse.” The very first form

⁸⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 41–43.

of private property had its origin in the family: Women and children were the slaves of men. They explained, "This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first form of property, but even at this stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists, who call it the power of disposing of the labor of others." The "natural" division of labor in the family, combined with the separation of society into distinct, opposing family units, necessarily implied an unequal distribution of labor and its products.⁸⁵ Thus Marx and Engels argued that women's oppression originated in the natural or sexual division of labor within the family. Women were the first form of private property: They were owned by men. Women's oppression was rooted in motherhood.⁸⁶

Yet Marx and Engels were not fully satisfied with this biological explanation of women's oppression, for it contradicted their idea that family relations had a social as well as a natural content and were ultimately determined by the existing productive forces.⁸⁷ If women's oppression predated every form of production, originating in immutable biological differences, a crucial determinant of gender roles and relations transcended the productive forces.

Marx and Engels's theoretical confusion on this question resulted, in large measure, from their ignorance about the family within tribal society. While they acknowledged the existence of human history prior to the development of private property, they were unable to conceptualize a family form that differed from the male-dominated paired unit. They argued that women's oppression and the patriarchal family accompanied the earliest forms of communal property.⁸⁸ Thus the oppression of women by men existed at every stage, even in tribal society, predating even the development of private property. Biology was the only conceivable explanation. This contradiction between Marx and Engels's newly advanced social perspective on

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 44, 46.

⁸⁶ Claude Meillassoux offers a more sophisticated argument along similar lines in *Maidens, Meat, and Money. Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981): 3–88. Meillassoux argues that the roots of women's oppression lie in the demographic needs of hunting and gathering bands.

⁸⁷ *German Ideology*, p. 50. ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

the family and their strictly biological explanation for women's oppression within it was not resolved by Engels until forty years later, when new anthropological discoveries allowed him to argue that group marriage and matriarchy characterized many societies based on communal property.⁸⁹

Although Marx and Engels were still stymied by the "natural" versus the "social explanation for the division of labor in the past," they quickly perceived the ramifications of capitalism's new division of labor for the future. In *The German Ideology*, they addressed the question of household labor, arguing that a communal domestic economy was a necessary prerequisite for women's liberation. Although they never defined this term, it appeared to denote the transfer of all domestic work from the individual household to the public sphere. Discarding Engels's initial blanket condemnation of female labor, they argued that capitalism was the first system to create the possibility of transferring housework from the private to the public sphere.⁹⁰

Moreover, they maintained that the substitution of the indi-

⁸⁹ Engels's work on the origins of patriarchy has been subject to enormous debate among contemporary anthropologists, historians, and feminists. See for example, Eleanor Leacock, "Introduction" in Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, pp. 7–67; Janet Sayers, Mary Evans, Nanneke Redclift, eds., *Engels Revisited. New Feminist Essays* (Tavistock, London, 1987). For critiques of Marxism from a feminist perspective, see Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979); Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union," and Carol Ehrlich, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Can It Be Saved?" in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution* (South End Press, Boston, 1981); Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Harvester, Sussex, 1983); Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women: Liberation and Socialism* (South End Press, Boston, 1978); Anja Meulenbelt, Joyce Outshoorn, Selma Sevenhuijsen, Petra DeVries, eds., *A Creative Tension. Key Issues of Socialist Feminism* (South End Press, Boston, 1984); Annette Kuhn, Ann Marie Wolpe, *Feminism and Materialism. Women and Modes of Production* (Boston, London, 1978); Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, Marilyn Young, eds., *Promissory Notes. Women in the Transition to Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1989); Alena Heitlinger, "Marxism, Feminism, and Sexual Equality," in Tova Yedlin, ed., *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Praeger, New York, 1980).

⁹⁰ *German Ideology*, pp. 75–76.

vidual family economy by a communal economy would be accompanied by the abolition or “supercession” of the family itself. This positive view of the abolition of the family contrasted sharply with Engels’s censorious observations of family breakdown in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argued that the new proletarian family was a prototype of future social relations. Unlike the bourgeois family, based on property, the working-class family was held together by bonds of real affection.⁹¹ This idealized notion of the proletarian family was firmly at odds with Engels’s earlier descriptions. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels abandoned the conventional stereotypes of proper family life in favor of a romantic vision of a union of individuals not motivated by property considerations. This idea remained essentially unchanged throughout Marx and Engels’s subsequent work. It appeared in *Principles of Communism* (1847), *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith* (1847), *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). Marx and Engels repeatedly contrasted the loveless matches of the propertied bourgeoisie with the affectionate unions of the propertyless proletariat. In their view, property was the main obstacle to relations based on love, equality, and mutual respect. They never discussed the specific forms of women’s oppression in the working-class family, nor did they advance beyond a rudimentary distinction between relations in the propertied versus propertyless family, although other Marxist theorists would return to this question in the future.⁹²

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 180–181.

⁹² Modern feminists and women’s historians are quite critical of Marx and Engels’s idealized notion of the proletarian family. Vogel, for example, writes that Marx and Engels’s view of the working-class household misses its significance as a social unit for reproduction, overlooks the nonpropertied but nevertheless material basis for male supremacy, and “vastly underestimates the variety of ideological and psychological factors that provide a continuing foundation for male supremacy and the working-class family,” pp. 84–85. Subsequent Marxist theorists like Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, E. O. Kabo, and others went considerably beyond these early formulations of Marx and Engels. See also Alfred Meyers’s *The Feminism and Socialism of Lily Braun* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985); and Claire LaVigna on the ideas of Anna Kuliscoff in “The Marxist

Drawing upon the theoretical formulations in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels summed up the programmatic aspect of their thinking in *Principles of Communism* and *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Women's emancipation depended on the abolition of private property and the creation of a communal domestic economy. Under socialism, relations between the sexes would be based on genuine affection, not property. Relations would become "a purely private affair," concerning "only the persons involved." Religious and secular authorities would have "no call to interfere."⁹³ This commitment to the personal and sexual freedom of the individual constituted a powerful libertarian motif in nineteenth-century socialist ideology. Strongly marked in August Bebel's work, it would become an integral tenet of early Bolshevik thought as well.

Thus as early as 1850, Marx and Engels had already formulated many of the ideas that would shape the Bolshevik vision. Unlike earlier utopian theorists, they grounded their vision of the future on a study of the modes of production and reproduction in the past. Recognizing the family as a social and not simply a natural construct, they began to challenge the gender division of labor. They acknowledged not only the inevitability of female labor, but its future role in creating a new, less oppressive family form.

Yet despite these profound insights, the socialist workers' movement throughout Europe was slow to accept female labor. In Germany, LaSalle's Workers' Association, founded in 1863, sought to exclude women from the labor force on the grounds that their presence worsened the material condition of the working class. And even many German Marxists refused to accept Marx and Engels's views. In England, the Secretary of the Trade Union Congress in 1877 was cheered as he demanded a family wage to enable women to return to their proper places in the home. In France, the workers' movement was particularly hostile to women's causes; French socialists sponsored legislation to limit women's right to work. The French Workers' Party (POF),

Ambivalence toward Women," in Boxer, Quataert, eds., *Socialist Women*.

⁹³ Frederick Engels, *Principles of Communism*, p. 354, and Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 501–502, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 6.

founded in 1879, was the first to break with the tradition of proletarian antifeminism and to demand complete equality of the sexes in public and private life. Yet even the POF was deeply divided and made little effort to organize women despite their growing presence in the industrial labor force. In Italy, the Socialist Party, founded in 1892, shied away from women's issues for fear of alienating a conservative trade union movement. And even the first Congress of the International rejected the inevitability of female labor despite Marx and Engels's position in *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings.⁹⁴ The battle over female labor was long and bitter: It took almost another half century of struggle before the workers' movement accepted the strategic implications of women's role in the wage labor force.

August Bebel's famous work, *Women and Socialism*, first published in 1879, was an important landmark in the move away from proletarian antifeminism and toward a more unifying strategy within the workers' movement. The book quickly became the most popular offering in the libraries of German workers. It was translated into numerous languages, and reissued in more than fifty editions in Germany alone. It became the basis for subsequent social-democratic organizing efforts among women and had an enormous effect on many of the future women leaders of the international socialist movement. Clara Zetkin, a leader of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), noted, "It was more than a book, it was an event – a great deed."⁹⁵

The book covered the entire history of women, from primitive

⁹⁴ On the responses of the European labor movement to female labor, see Marilyn Boxer, "Socialism Faces Feminism: the Failure of Synthesis in France, 1887–1914," and Claire LaVigna, "The Marxist Ambivalence toward Women," in Boxer, Quataert, eds. *Socialist Women*; Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 274; Thonessen, *The Emancipation of Women*, pp. 15, 20–22.

⁹⁵ Philip Foner, ed., *Clara Zetkin. Selected Writings* (International, New York, 1984): 79. Hereafter cited as *Zetkin*. Jane Slaughter and Robert Kerr, eds., note in their introduction to *European Women on the Left* (Greenwood, Conn., 1981): 5, that Bebel's book changed the SPD's attitude toward women; and Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia. Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1978): 234, called the book "the unofficial bible of the European Marxist movement."

society to the present, including material on Greek drama, Athenian wives and courtesans, Christianity, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the eighteenth century, and industrial society. Unlike Engels in his later work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Bebel offered little theoretical analysis. His critique was primarily moral, centering on the evils and hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Bebel also departed from Marx and Engels in his interest in the history of sexuality. His discussions of the antisexual nature of Christianity, the church's views toward women, and the cult of the Virgin Mary were remarkably novel, anticipating feminist discussions a full century later.⁹⁶

Bebel extolled sexuality, writing frankly of "the natural desires implanted in every healthy adult." "Sexual impulse," he explained, "is neither moral nor immoral; it is simply natural, like hunger or thirst." He wrote movingly of the sexual unhappiness in so many modern marriages and the pernicious effect of the double standard that forced women to suppress their most powerful instincts. He saw women's subjugation most clearly through the lens of sexuality. "Nothing can prove the dependent position of women in a more emphatic and revolting way," he wrote, "than these vastly differing conceptions in regard to the satisfaction of the same natural impulse." Like Marx and Engels, he posited a free union founded on love in place of the "forced relations" created by capitalism.⁹⁷

Surprisingly, the book devoted a scant ten pages to the subject of its title: women and socialism. Here, like Marx and Engels, Bebel predicted a new freedom of union for women. Socialism, he argued, "will merely reinstate on a higher level of civilization . . . what generally prevailed before private property." In keeping with his emphasis on sexuality, Bebel's predictions had a powerful libertarian cast. "No one is accountable to any one else and no third person has a right to interfere," he wrote; "What I eat and drink, how I sleep and dress is my private affair, and my private affair also is my intercourse with a person of the opposite sex."⁹⁸

In 1884, soon after Marx's death, Engels published *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, a comprehensive study

⁹⁶ August Bebel, *Women and Socialism* (New York, 1910): 76, 83.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 100, 104, 174. ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 466, 467.

of the origins of women's oppression and the development of the family. The book had a great impact on socialist thinkers, including Bebel, who quickly incorporated Engels's theoretical advances into subsequent editions of *Women and Socialism*. Engels based *The Origin* on Marx's "Ethnological Notebooks" compiled in 1880–1881. Marx's notes covered a groundbreaking study of kinship among the American Indians written by Lewis Henry Morgan in 1877. In Engels's words, the new data made it possible to go beyond "the Five Books of Moses," to develop a theory of the evolution of the family.⁹⁹

In *The Origin*, Engels directly acknowledged the centrality of reproduction to the historical process. The social organization of any given period, he argued, was determined not only by the division of labor, but by the form of the family as well. He began his analysis of the family with a discussion of tribal relations, claiming that there was a stage when "unrestricted sexual freedom prevailed within the tribe." Over time, marriage groups were gradually formed along generational lines, and pairing no longer occurred between parents and children. Group marriage by generation was slowly superceded by a new family form as intercourse between brothers and sisters (children of the same mother) became taboo. Engels argued that this system, known as the gens, lay at the heart of the social orders of most barbarian peoples until the advent of the Greek and Roman civilizations. The early history of the family consisted of the progressive narrowing of the circle that had originally embraced the whole tribe. Finally, only the single pair remained.¹⁰⁰

Yet even the single-pair system was still based on a communal household and descent through the female line. Engels argued that communal housekeeping guaranteed the supremacy of the woman in the house, while the exclusive recognition of the female parent (due to the difficulty of identifying the male) ensured that women were held in high esteem. Women lived with their gens, inviting men from other gens to live with them permanently or temporarily. Women kept the children and shared household tasks with their sisters. If a man displeased a woman, she tossed him out of the communal dwelling. According to

⁹⁹ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72, 94–112.

Engels, the communal household formed “the material foundation of that supremacy of women which was general in primitive times.”¹⁰¹

Engels never clearly specified the reasons for the transition from group marriage to the loosely paired couple. He suggested that the change may have been caused by increasing population density and the erosion of older communistic forms of social life. Women themselves may have brought about the change. Yet matriarchy and the communal household still prevailed despite the widening application of the incest taboo and the narrowing of the marriage circle.¹⁰²

According to Engels, the critical change in the position of women occurred as a result of the domestication of animals and the development of agriculture. Once human labor produced a surplus over its maintenance costs, slavery arose. Men, who had always owned the instruments of production, replaced their bows and arrows with cattle and slaves. Yet a man was still unable to pass on property to his children. Upon his death, his property reverted either to his brothers and sisters or to his sisters' children. The development of private property demanded that “mother right” be overthrown. The offspring of the male now remained with his own gens, and the offspring of the female went to the father's gens. Paternity was ensured by the enforcement of women's fidelity. Monogamy for women replaced the loosely paired family. The man took command in the home and “the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude.” The patriarchal family replaced the communal household of sisters. “The overthrow of mother right,” Engels declared, “was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*.”¹⁰³

Blasting the bourgeois hypocrisy that surrounded patriarchal monogamy, Engels scornfully denied that it was “the fruit of individual sex love,” insisting instead on its historical origin as “the subjugation of one sex by the other.” Women's oppression was rooted in the destruction of the communal household. Once household management lost its public character and became a “private service,” “the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production.”¹⁰⁴

According to Engels, capitalism created the first real possi-

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 113. ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 117. ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–121.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 128, 137.

bility for women's liberation since the overthrow of mother right, by once again involving women in social production. Yet it simultaneously gave rise to new contradictions between women's social role and the older family form. If a woman carried out "her duties in the private sphere of her family," her ability to earn a wage was limited. And if she entered the workforce, she could hardly "carry out her family duties."¹⁰⁵ Engels believed that this contradiction between the older family form, based on the private domestic services of the wife, and the increasing involvement of women in production could not be resolved under capitalism. Capitalism created the preconditions for women's liberation by giving women their economic independence, but only socialism could create a new family form that properly corresponded to women's new roles.

Under socialism, private housekeeping would be transformed into social industry. The care and education of children would become a public affair. And "the economic foundations of monogamy, as they have existed hitherto will disappear." Monogamy would be replaced by "individual sex love." The only moral marriage would be one in which "love continues." And if "the intense emotion of sex love," differing in duration from person to person, came to an end, separation would be "a benefit for both partners as well as for society."¹⁰⁶

In *The Origin*, Engels provided the fullest expression of Marxist thinking on women and the family, offering an analysis of women's oppression based on changing relations of production. He initiated the theoretical discussion of the contradiction between the reproductive and the productive spheres under capitalism, advancing a new imperative for the abolition of the family under socialism. He confidently predicted a new dawn for women's liberation under capitalism, premised on women's increasing involvement in the wage labor force.

The work of Engels and Bebel was crucial in combatting proletarian antifeminism in the workers' movement, but so were the practical efforts to implement their ideas. One of the key figures in popularizing and developing new strategies was Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), an immensely talented leader of the German social-democratic movement and tireless proponent of the rights

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–138. ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 138, 145.

of working women. Zetkin first read Bebel's book while in her early twenties and it immediately changed her views of women. Although her theoretical efforts never rivaled that of Engels or Bebel, her organizational work, speeches, writing, and lifelong commitment to women workers helped chart a new direction within the European socialist movement and the Social Democratic Party of Germany in particular.¹⁰⁷

Zetkin's theoretical work was closely intertwined with her organizational activities on behalf of women. Like Marx, Engels, and Bebel, she recognized that women's increasing involvement in waged work was historically inevitable, and she fought to ensure that this analysis was reflected in the practical strategies of the socialist parties. She repeatedly clashed with the more conservative members of the labor movement who sought to eliminate women from the workforce by demanding a family wage. Zetkin considered this demand to be futile. If employers insisted on female labor because it was cheaper, men and women must fight for "equal pay for equal work." The trade unions had to begin organizing women. In her speech to the founding Congress of the Second International in 1889, Zetkin spoke forcefully on behalf of women workers. She explained, "It is not women's work per se which in competition with men's work lowers wages, but rather the exploitation of female labor by the capitalists who appropriate it." She later summarized this speech in a pamphlet that became a guide for the future policies of the SPD. Zetkin not only defended women's right to work, but believed that waged work was a "quintessential prerequisite" for women's independence. Although in Zetkin's words, "the slave of the husband became the slave of the employer," she insisted that women "gained from this transformation."¹⁰⁸

On a theoretical level, Zetkin enlarged upon the initial insights of Engels and Bebel. Focusing on the transition from an

¹⁰⁷ For two fine essays on Clara Zetkin and the SPD, see Jean Quataert, "Unequal Partners in an Uneasy Alliance: Women and the Working Class in Imperial Germany," in Boxer, Quataert, eds., *Socialist Women*; and Karen Honeycut, "Clara Zetkin: A Socialist Approach to the Problem of Women's Oppression," in *European Women on the Left*. Alfred Meyer presents a more negative view of Zetkin as an antifeminist in *The Feminism and Socialism of Lily Braun*.

¹⁰⁸ *Zetkin*, pp. 56, 45, 47.

agrarian to an industrial economy, Zetkin explored the change in women's roles with the expansion of commodity production. She argued that in precapitalist society, women were "an extraordinarily productive force," producing all or most of the goods needed by the family. The transition to machine production and large-scale industry rendered women's economic activity within the family superfluous, for modern industry produced needed goods cheaper and faster. As the production of goods within the home became increasingly unnecessary, women's domestic activity lost its function and its meaning. This created a new contradiction between women's need to participate in public life and their legal inability to do so. The very existence of the "woman question" was premised on this contradiction.¹⁰⁹

To Zetkin, a women's movement was unthinkable in a peasant society. It could emerge only "within those classes of society who are the very children of the modern mode of production."¹¹⁰ Following Engels, she argued that women's oppression resulted from the development of private property, but she added that a women's movement against such oppression could only result from the conditions of capitalist production that thrust women into the public sphere while placing numerous restrictions on their ability to function within it. Zetkin thus used a Marxist framework to explain the genesis of the nineteenth-century "woman question" itself.

Marx and Engels made no distinction between the various forms of oppression suffered by women of different classes. Zetkin was the first to situate women's oppression within a more subtle understanding of class. In essence, she posited a different "woman question" for each class in capitalist society. Upper-class women were primarily concerned with the freedom to manage their own property. Middle-class, educated women sought professional training and job opportunities, or in Zetkin's words, "untrammelled competition between men and women." Proletarian women, compelled to work to supplement their families' wages, furthered their own interests by joining with men to fight for better working conditions for both sexes.¹¹¹

Zetkin's years of efforts on behalf of women workers received

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46. ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–76. Despite Zetkin's close experience with male hostility to female labor, she reserved her contemptuous phrase, "un-

international recognition in 1907 at the Congress of the Second International. The first International Conference of Socialist Women was held at the same time, and the International endorsed the principle of women's right to work, the creation of special women's organizations within all the socialist parties, and a position on active organizing for women's suffrage.¹¹² An official strategy for women's full enfranchisement – political, economic, and social – was finally in place.

Soviet theorists

By 1900, the ideas of August Bebel and Clara Zetkin were widely known in Russian social-democratic circles, for many of the social-democratic leaders had read extensively in Marxist literature abroad. The first Russian edition of Bebel's famous work was published in 1895 and others soon followed. Kollontai had been greatly influenced by Marx, Engels, and Bebel, as well as by the literature of the French Revolution and the utopian socialists. A meeting with Zetkin in 1906 convinced her of the need to begin organizing working-class women at home.¹¹³

The advances of European social democrats on the women question undoubtedly influenced their Russian counterparts, but progressive circles in Russia had long championed ideas of free union and women's equality. George Sand's emphasis on

trammled competition," to describe only middle-class women's demands.

¹¹² Stites, pp. 237–239; Thonessen, pp. 44–45, 65.

¹¹³ Stites, pp. 247, 250–251. Stites offers the best and most comprehensive treatment of the development of ideas about women's liberation. See also Linda Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900–1917* (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1984) and her "Russian Feminists and the First All-Russian Congress of Women," *Russian History*, 3, part 2 (1976): 123–149; Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, Gail Lapidus, eds., *Women in Russia* (Harvester, Sussex, 1978); G. A. Tishkin, *Zhenskii vopros v Rossii v 50–60 gg. xix v.* (Leningrad, 1984); Anne Bobroff, "The Bolsheviks and Working Women, 1905–1920," *Soviet Studies*, 26, no. 4 (1974); Barbara Clements "Bolshevik Women: The First Generation," in Yedlin, ed. *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*; M. Donald, "Bolshevik Activity amongst the Working Women of Petrograd in 1917," *International Review of Social History*, 27, part 2 (1982).

love and the emotional imperatives of the heart found an eager audience among the Russian gentry in the 1830s, and advocates for women's education in the 1850s reiterated many of the European debates over women's potential. Moreover, Russians quickly made these ideas their own. Nikolai Chernyshevskii's famous novel, *What Is to Be Done?* converted several generations of young rebels to the causes of free union and women's emancipation. The nihilists attempted to put his ideas of communal living and working arrangements into practice in the 1860s. Such experiments were not altogether successful, but they nonetheless influenced subsequent generations of radicals who continued to reject the traditional family and to demand women's independence. The populists and terrorists of the 1870s and 1880s subordinated the woman question to a broader politics of class, but they unhesitatingly embraced the ideals of comradeship, companionate union, mutual respect, and women's equality pioneered by the nihilists. Women's unusually influential role in the leadership of these groups, especially the terrorist People's Will, was "a unique phenomenon in nineteenth century European history."¹¹⁴ Bolshevik views of marriage and the family drew not only on a European tradition shaped by the work of Marx, Engels, and Bebel, but also a native revolutionary culture shared by Marxists and non-Marxists alike.

Yet Bolshevik thinking on the family went far beyond the communal experiments of Russian radical movements. In terms of its analytical categories, its historical methods, and its prescriptions for structural change, Bolshevik thinking drew heavily on the precepts of "scientific" – not "utopian" – socialism. The party's concern with the production and consumption functions of the family, its insistence on the withering away of the family as historically inevitable, and its emphasis on the link between wage labor and women's liberation, were all drawn directly from Marxist theory.

Not surprisingly, given the overwhelmingly peasant character of the country and its relatively recent experience with industrialization, Soviet theorists were particularly interested in the transformation of the family in the transition from a peasant to

¹¹⁴ Stites, p. 153; See also Barbara Engel's pioneering study, *Mothers and Daughters. Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983).

an industrialized society. Marx, Engels, and Bebel had observed that capitalism stripped the family of its most crucial functions, but they had never dealt empirically or theoretically with this transformation. Zetkin was the first to offer a Marxist analysis of the loss of the family's productive function in the move from peasant to proletarian. In examining this transition, Soviet theorists posited the idea of the waged, urban family as a unit of consumption, a novel conception that was considerably more sophisticated than the idealized proletarian family offered by Marx and Engels. Their innovative thinking permitted the discovery and exploration of deeper patterns of dependency and domination within the working-class family.

Many Soviet theorists were interested in the dwindling economic importance of the family and the gradual atrophy of its various social functions. Nikolai Bukharin, a member of the Politburo and a highly respected theoretician, provided a brief historical overview of the family in his well-known work, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*. Here Bukharin distinguished between the peasant family, "a firm unit" based directly on production, and the working-class family, a weaker entity, based largely on consumption. He described the atrophy of the productive function of the family in the transition to urban life and wage labor, noting that city services, women's entrance into the labor force, and the increased mobility of labor all served to "disintegrate the family."¹¹⁵

Kollontai took Bukharin's dichotomy between production and consumption several steps further in her investigation of its effect on social traditions and sexual morality. She argued that family and marriage relations were strongest in those precapitalist economies where the family served both as a unit of production and consumption. The "withering away" of the family was the result of a long historical process that began with the elimination of the family as the primary unit of production. The

¹¹⁵ Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism. A System of Sociology* (International Publishers, New York, 1925): 156. P. I. Stuchka, the first commissar of justice, also identified the productive function of the family with the peasantry. Like Bukharin, he argued that with the development of capitalism, the family was replaced by the factory as the primary unit of production. See his "Semeinoe Pravo," *Revoliutsiia prava*, 1 (1925): 175.

sociologist Vol'fson explained this process: "Already at the end of capitalism, the family has almost no productive labor function, its child-rearing function is strongly limited, its political function is withering away, and even its household function is circumscribed. Under socialist society, the disintegration of the family is fully achieved." Both Kollontai and Vol'fson reasoned that the loss of the productive function was another indicator of the inevitability of the family's historical demise.¹¹⁶

Unlike Vol'fson, however, some theorists were less sanguine in their predictions of the family's demise as they probed its role under capitalism more deeply. Marx and Engels had argued that little held the propertyless proletarian family together other than genuine affection, and that moreover, given its lack of property, there was "no basis for any kind of male supremacy" in the proletarian household. E. O. Kabo, a leading economist and sociologist of working-class family life in the 1920s, strenuously challenged this idea in her sophisticated theoretical and empirical work on the Soviet proletarian family of the 1920s.

Kabo pointed out important structures of gender dependency within the working-class family that had been overlooked by Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Zetkin. She argued that although the working-class family was no longer a unit of production, it remained the primary unit of organizing reproduction and consumption, providing for the care of the old, the sick, and the very young. In the absence of other social forms, mothers with young children, the old, and the disabled could not survive without the support system of the family. Without the family, the working class would be unable to reproduce itself. The family represented "the most profitable and most efficient organization of workers' consumption and the upbringing of a new generation."¹¹⁷

In Kabo's view, the family functioned as a unit of consumption by organizing the care of the nonwaged *at the expense of the wage-workers*. One of the most essential functions of the working-class family was thus to redistribute income by combining the contributions of all its members to ensure a basic living standard for

¹¹⁶ Kollontai, "Tezisy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblast Brachnykh Otnoshenii," p. 28, and her "Sem'ia i Kommunizm," *Kommunistka*, 7 (1920): 17; Vol'fson, p. 375.

¹¹⁷ E. O. Kabo, *Ocherki rabochego byta* (Moscow, 1928): 25–26.

both its paid and unpaid members. She wrote, "The construction of the working-class family is such that the standard of living of all its members is approximately the same. In this way, equality of consumption is achieved despite the extreme inequality of salary payments." The family served as a mechanism by which the burden for the reproduction of labor was shifted onto the wage-earning male. The very existence of the working-class family was based on "the voluntary exploitation of one worker by the others."¹¹⁸ Thus Kabo turned Marx and Engels's analysis on its head: The central fact of family life was not that the husband exploited the wife, but that the wife, and all the non-wage-earning family members, "exploited" the wage-earning husband. Kabo used this word in its narrowest sense, of course, to signify that the non-wage-earning lived at the expense, or by the labor power, of the wage-earning.

In contrast to Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Zetkin, who variously explored the process by which capitalism undermined traditional family roles and ultimately the family itself, Kabo focused on the forces of capitalism that held the family together. She argued that women's lower levels of pay and skill and their maternal responsibilities reinforced and perpetuated their economic dependence on men. Salary differentiation according to skill supported "the dependence of one worker on another, preventing unskilled workers from leaving the family." Unlike Marx and Engels, who argued that capitalism undermined the family by involving women in waged work, Kabo saw the more subtle ways in which labor market segmentation, salary differentials, and women's reproductive role created powerful economic fetters within the family.

Perhaps most important, Kabo's observations applied with equal force to the working-class family under both capitalism and socialism. Positing an inverse relation between salary differentiation and the strength of the family, she wrote, "Low salaries, wide wage disparities among workers, low norms of social insurance, and high waves of unemployment, all ensure a stronger taproot of family life." These were precisely the factors, Kabo knew, that characterized Soviet labor relations in the 1920s. Only a reversal of these conditions – through an egalitar-

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

ian wage policy, comprehensive social welfare programs, and full employment— could lead to the liberation of women, children, the old, and the disabled, “the weakest economic elements of the working-class family.” Only then would the family cease to be a necessary form of social organization.¹¹⁹

Like Kabo, Kollontai was sensitive to the forces that held the propertyless working-class family together. But whereas Kabo stressed the dependence of women on men, Kollontai emphasized the mutual dependence of the sexes in the absence of the socialization of household labor. Male workers depended on women for the preparation of food, clothing, and a variety of other nonwaged but essential tasks. Despite the loss of the productive function, the proletarian family “preserved for itself a certain stability.” Focusing on the contribution of domestic labor, Kollontai explained, “The less accessible the apparatus of social consumption was for the masses, the more necessary was the family.”¹²⁰ For Kollontai, the family would continue to serve an indispensable function as long as household labor remained privatized.

These Soviet theorists went considerably beyond the hasty sketches offered by Marx, Engels, and Bebel of the family under socialism. Emphasizing the transition from peasantry to proletariat, they explored the loss of the productive function within the family and the continuing significance of consumption. Both Kabo and Kollontai provided new theoretical insights into the bonds that held the working-class family together under both capitalism and socialism. Moreover, their work had major strategic implications. If the state was serious about women’s liberation, it had to implement policies to abolish wage differentiation, to raise wages, to establish broad social services, and to socialize household labor.

The first code on marriage, the family, and guardianship

The Bolsheviks recognized that law alone could not liberate women, but the first steps they took, naturally enough, were to

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Kollontai, “Tezisy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali,” pp. 28–29.

eliminate Russia's antiquated family laws and to provide a new legal framework for their own vision of social relations. Reform-minded jurists had attempted to update Russia's laws for more than a half-century prior to the October Revolution but had met with little success. In two brief decrees, published in December 1917, the Bolsheviks accomplished far more than the Ministry of Justice, progressive journalists, feminists, the Duma, and the Council of State had ever even attempted: They substituted civil for religious marriage and established divorce at the request of either spouse. A complete Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship was ratified by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet (VTsIK) a year later, in October 1918.¹²¹ The new Code swept away centuries of patriarchal and ecclesiastical power and established a new doctrine based on individual rights and gender equality.

Prior to the Revolution, Russian law recognized the right of each religion to control marriage and divorce according to its own laws, and incorporated this right into state law. Women were accorded few rights by either the church or the state. According to state law, a wife owed complete obedience to her husband. She was compelled to live with him, take his name, and assume his social status. Up to 1914, when limited reforms permitted a woman to separate from her husband and obtain her own passport, a woman was unable to take a job, get an education, receive a passport for work or residence, or execute a bill of exchange without her husband's consent.¹²² A wife was "responsible to obey her husband as head of the household," in "unlimited obedience." In return, the husband was "to live with her in harmony, to respect and protect her, forgive her insufficiencies, and ease her infirmities." He was responsible to support her according to his status and his abilities. The only mitigating factor in this bleak prescription for patriarchal power was that Russian law, unlike European law, did not establish joint property be-

¹²¹ *1-i kodeks zakonov ob aktakh grazhdanskogo sostoianii, brachnom, semeinom i opekunskom prave* (Moscow, 1918). The best treatment of the development of the 1918 Family Code is offered by N. A. Semiderkin, *Sozdanie Pervogo Brachno-Semeinogo Kodeksa* (Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, Moscow, 1989). See also A. M. Beliakova, E. M. Vorozheikin, *Sovetskoe semeinoe pravo* (Moscow, 1974): 63–65.

¹²² William Wagner, "In Pursuit of Orderly Change: Judicial Power and the Conflict over Civil Law in Late Imperial Russia," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1981. pp. 2–7.

tween spouses. Within this legal configuration, each spouse was permitted to own and acquire separate property. A woman's dowry, inheritance, special purchases, and gifts were recognized as her own.¹²³

The power relations between husband and wife were replicated between father and children. A father held almost unconditional power over his children, not merely to the age of majority, but for life. Only children from a recognized marriage were considered legitimate; illegitimate children had no legal rights or recourse. Up to 1902, when the state enacted limited reforms, an illegitimate child could only be adopted, recognized, or subsequently legitimized by special imperial consent, even if the father was so inclined.¹²⁴

It was almost impossible to divorce in prerevolutionary Russia. The Orthodox Church considered marriage a holy sacrament that few circumstances could dissolve. Divorce was permissible only in cases of adultery (witnessed by at least two people), impotence, exile, or a prolonged and unexplained absence by a spouse. In cases of adultery or impotence, the responsible party was permanently forbidden to remarry. The Holy Synod granted divorce grudgingly and rarely.¹²⁵

Progressive-minded jurists attempted to reform family law after 1869, but powerful conservative state and religious authorities blocked even the most timorous attempts. A special commission within the Ministry of Justice published a new civil code after 1900, but it was never enacted, despite the commission's elaborate precautions to avoid infringing on the prerogatives of the church. The horizon of possibility itself was clouded by the intransigence of the Holy Synod. Even the most radical critics of family law did not advocate equality between men and women, and in fact they proposed little beyond the inclusion of mutual consent as grounds for divorce and the adoption of illegitimate children at the father's request.¹²⁶

The Soviet state's first Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship highlighted the timidity of the prerevolutionary

¹²³ *Svod zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 10, part 1 (1914): 11–13.

¹²⁴ Wagner, pp. 5–6.

¹²⁵ N. A. Semiderkin, "Tserkovnyi Brak i Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia v Rossii," *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta*, 2 (1980): 30–31.

¹²⁶ Wagner, ch. 3 and 4.

attempts at reform. Goikhbarg, a former Menshevik who joined the Bolsheviks after the Revolution and became the Siberian *oblast'* commissar of justice, headed a committee to draft the Code in August 1918. Only 34 years old at the time of the Revolution, Goikhbarg had already written several commentaries on prerevolutionary civil law. A member of the *kollegiia* of the Commissariat of Justice, he also helped draft the new Civil Code and other pieces of legislation. He wrote extensively on family law, economic law, and civil procedure in the 1920s.¹²⁷ In its insistence on individual rights and gender equality, the Code constituted nothing less than the most progressive family legislation the world had ever seen.¹²⁸ It abolished the inferior legal status of women and created equality under the law. Eliminating the validity of religious marriage, it gave legal status to civil marriage only, and set up local bureaus of statistics (known as ZAGS) for the registration of marriage, divorce, birth, and death. The Code established divorce at the request of either spouse: No grounds were necessary. And it extended the same guarantees of alimony to both men and women.

The Code swept away centuries of property law and male privilege by abolishing illegitimacy and entitling all children to parental support. All children, whether they were born within or outside a registered marriage, had equal rights. The Code thus severed the concept of marriage from that of family by constructing familial obligations independent of the marriage contract. Zinaida Tettenborn, noting "the sharp delimitation of the rights of marriage and the rights of the family," wrote, "In this area, the Code breaks with the tradition of European legisla-

¹²⁷ A subdepartment of the Department of Legal Suggestions and Codification (OZPK) was responsible for editing legal plans after they were developed by the appropriate commissariats, and before their submission to Sovnarkom. The OZPK was abolished during the civil war, reestablished in 1920, and reorganized in 1921 to serve as a consultative body for the VTsIK and Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars). On the early history of the Commissariat of Justice, see L. I. Antonova, "Pravotvorcheskaia Deiatel'nost' Vyshikh Organov Gosudarstvennoi Vlasti Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 1917–1922," Candidate Degree, Leningrad State University, 1964, pp. 141–161; and A. A. Nelidov, *Istoriia gosudarstvennykh uchrezhdenii SSSR, 1917–1936* (Moscow, 1962).

¹²⁸ *The Marriage Laws of Soviet Russia: The Complete Text of the First Code of the RSFSR* (New York, 1921).

tion and jurisprudence which views family relations in connection with the institution of marriage.”¹²⁹

The Code forbade adoption in the belief that the state would be a better guardian for an orphan than an individual family. In a primarily agrarian society, jurists feared that adoption would allow peasants to exploit children as unpaid labor. Anticipating the time when all children would enjoy the benefits of collective upbringing, jurists and educators considered the abolition of adoption the first step in transferring child care from the family to the state.

In accordance with the prevailing idea of marriage as a union between equals, the Code sharply restricted the duties and obligations of the marital bond. Marriage did not create community of property between spouses: A woman retained full control of her earnings after marriage and neither spouse had any claim on the property of the other. Although the Code provided an unlimited term of alimony for either gender, support was limited to the disabled poor. The Code presupposed that both parties, married or divorced, would support themselves.

From a comparative perspective, the 1918 Code was remarkably ahead of its time. Similar legislation concerning gender equality, divorce, legitimacy, and property has yet to be enacted in America and many European countries.¹³⁰ Yet despite the Code's radical innovations, jurists were quick to point out “that this is not socialist legislation, but legislation of the transitional time.”¹³¹ As such the Code preserved marriage registration, alimony, child support, and other provisions related to the continuing if temporary need for the family unit.

As Marxists, the jurists were in the odd position of creating legislation that they believed would soon become irrelevant. Discussing the role of the civil registry offices (ZAGS), Goikhbarg wrote, “It will be possible, perhaps within a very short time, to

¹²⁹ Zinaida Tettenborn, “Vvedenie,” in *Pervyi kodeks zakonov ob aktakh grazhdanskogo sostoianiiia, brachnom, semeinom i opekunskom prave* (Moscow, 1918): 14.

¹³⁰ On the history of European family law, see Mary Ann Glendon, *State, Law, and Family. Family Law in Transition in the United States and Western Europe* (North Holland, Amsterdam, 1977).

¹³¹ *Piatyi sozyv Vserossiiskogo Tsentral'nogo Iсполnitel'nogo Komiteta. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1919): 146. Hereafter cited as 1918 VTsIK.

eliminate the need for certain registrations, for example, marriage registration, for the family will soon be replaced by a more reasonable, more rational differentiation based on separate individuals." Surveying the legal field from the lofty heights of revolutionary victory, Goikhbarg considered that the new Family Code, and other legislation as well, would not last very long. He firmly proclaimed, "Of course, in publishing these law codes, proletarian power, in constructing socialism, does not want to rely on these codes for very long. It does not want to create 'eternal' codes or codes which will last for centuries." The purpose of the law was *not* to strengthen the family or the state. "The new dictatorship of the proletariat," Goikhbarg noted, "does not want to imitate the bourgeoisie, aiming to strengthen its power by the help of eternal codes that would exist for centuries." Law, like the family and the state itself, would soon wither away. In its absence, society would preserve only "organizing norms" for demographic purposes, such as statistics on birth and death.¹³²

Other commentators also stressed the transitional nature of the Code. Tettenborn acknowledged that provisions such as alimony were necessary as long as the state could not support its needy citizens, but that ultimately, responsibility would belong "to the state or society." Alimony, "a necessary condition of the transitional moment," was justified "only by the present inability to organize a comprehensive program of social welfare." Tettenborn advanced a similar argument on child support and parent-child relations. Although the Code made striking and important changes in the relationship between parents and children by substituting parental "rights," exercised "exclusively in the interests of the child," for parental "power," it still preserved the family as the primary unit for bringing up children. Tettenborn explained, "The new family rights stand on the border between the old world and that shining new world where all society will be one family."¹³³

In Goikhbarg's opinion, the new Family Code went as far as

¹³² A. G. Goikhbarg, "Pervyi Kodeks Zakonov RSFSR," *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, 7 (1918): 5, 3, 4.

¹³³ Tettenborn, "Vvedenie," p. 16, and her "Roditel'skie Prava v Pervom Kodekse Zakonov RSFSR," pp. 27, 28. See Kurskii's comments in *1918 VTsIK* for similar views, pp. 146–147.

possible given the constraints of the transitional period. It liberated women “insofar as it is possible to liberate them in this transitional time.” Looking forward to the free unions of the future, Goikhbarg optimistically explained that “each day of the existence of such laws on marriage undermines (as much as possible) the idea of individual marriage, the legal fetters of husband and wife.”¹³⁴

The committee drafted the new Family Code quickly and smoothly with only a few minor disagreements.¹³⁵ Committee members debated whether spouses should be required to assume a common surname. M. A. Reisner, a representative of the Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counter-revolution, Sabotage, and Speculation (Cheka) and Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) who propounded a controversial theory of competing systems of class-based law, contended that people should have the right to choose their own names, but Goikhbarg’s argument that a common surname was “a strong weapon in the struggle with the church” prevailed. Reisner suggested that children, as well as adults, should have rights to manage property, but this proposal was also rejected. The jurists were extraordinarily sensitive to the language in the Code describing children born out of wedlock, and struck the term *vnebrachnye*, literally “outside marriage,” from the text, replacing

¹³⁴ A. G. Goikhbarg, “Pervyi Kodeks Zakonov RSFSR,” pp. 8, 9.

¹³⁵ The Code was drafted in the aftermath of an extensive organizational shakeup in the newly formed Commissariat of Justice (NKIu.) Initially, NKIu was headed by a *kollegiia* composed of three left Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and three Bolsheviks, and chaired by the People’s Commissar of Justice, the Bolshevik P. I. Stuchka. The department of codification was chaired by the Deputy People’s Commissar, the left SR A. Shreider. In March 1918, after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the left SRs officially withdrew from the Soviet government in protest, and Shreider resigned from his posts. After some confusion, the SR leadership ordered its members in NKIu to remain at their jobs. Shreider announced his decision to return, but Stuchka promptly declared his opposition. The Bolshevik members of the *kollegiia*, Stuchka, P. Krasikov, D. Kurskii, and M. Kozlovskii, quickly voted to expel Shreider and the other left SRs from their leadership positions, and in a miniature coup, reallocated the various departments among the remaining Bolsheviks. See TsGAOR, fond 1235, opis’ 93, delo 199, pp. 1–2, and pp. 161–188 for a draft of the 1918 Code.

it with the longer, clumsier formulation, “children of parents who are not in a registered marriage.” Yet the committee resolved these minor disputes amicably and quickly approved a final draft.¹³⁶

Critics outside the Commissariat of Justice, however, were less satisfied with the final draft. Goikhbarg noted that there was “particularly sharp carping” in the discussion of the Code, especially over the provision on marriage registration. Several critics wanted to abolish marriage altogether. Quoting his opponents, Goikhbarg recounted: “They screamed at us: ‘Registration of marriage, formal marriage, what kind of socialism is this?’”¹³⁷ N. A. Roslavets, a Ukrainian woman delegate to the 1918 Central Executive Committee of the Soviet (VTsIK), objected strongly to the section on marriage, noting that she could not reconcile it with her “socialist consciousness.”¹³⁸ She argued that registered marriage was a step backward, away from socialism. “In the final analysis,” she declared, “we are moving the population away from a basic socialist understanding, from the freedom of the individual, and from the freedom of marriage relations as one of the conditions of individual freedom.” Roslavets argued that marriage was the personal and private affair of every citizen,” and that the “choice of every person entering marriage should be absolutely free.” She branded the Code “some kind of bourgeois survival” from a period when the state had a vested interest in the marital pair. Marriage “is very significant for the capitalist state,” she charged, “but the interference of the state in the business of marriage, even in the form of registration which the Code suggests, is completely incomprehensible, not only in a socialist system, but in the transition.” Roslavets, taking a strong libertarian position, contended that “the invasion of the state,” sanctioned by the Code, violated “the freedom of the individual in the most intimate area,” as well as

¹³⁶ TsGAOR, fond 1235, opis' 93, delo 199, pp. 154–160. See also N. A. Semiderkin, *Sozdanie pervogo brachno-semeinogo kodeksa*, p. 35, for information on Reisner and the committee to draft the Code.

¹³⁷ Goikhbarg, “Pervyi Kodeks Zakonov RSFSR,” p. 7.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* Semiderkin notes that Roslavets entered the VTsIK as a representative of a non-Party group, which included communists and noncommunists.

“the most elementary rights.” Angrily, she demanded, “I cannot understand why this Code establishes compulsory monogamy.” In Roslavets’s opinion, the only statistic that the state needed to register was birth.

Roslavets also opposed the Code’s provision on alimony, arguing that it was “nothing other than a payment for love.” Marriage, she argued, should not entail any economic consequences. Bourgeois society constructed a single economic unit from the marital pair and encouraged the spouses to accumulate private property. The task of socialist society was to destroy this petty bourgeois form of family. “We should help create the possibility of more freedom,” Roslavets urged, “and not encourage anyone to such a form of marriage.” Alimony simply promoted “the view that girls should search for and attach themselves to a marriageable man and not develop themselves as people.” Roslavets suggested that the VTsIK reject the marriage section of the Code. “Only then,” she concluded, “will the state liberate the individual.”¹³⁹

Goikhbarg, the official representative of the Code in the VTsIK, attempted to rebut Roslavets’s objections. He patiently explained that the Code limited alimony to the disabled poor, and that it was impossible to abolish everything at once. Without the right to alimony, a woman would be unprotected; “This will be a hypocritical phrase,” Goikhbarg argued, “not equality in law.” Goikhbarg’s main argument, however, was that marriage registration was absolutely crucial in the struggle against the church and its control of marriage. Without civil marriage, the population would resort to religious ceremonies and the church would flourish. In his opinion, Roslavets’s suggestions were “radical in words” but “reactionary in deed.”¹⁴⁰

Goikhbarg’s arguments evidently convinced the majority of delegates, for in October 1918, one year after the Revolution, the VTsIK voted the new Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship into law. The Code contained a mix of reformist and revolutionary legislation: Its provision on civil marriage brought Russia up to date with changes in other European countries, but its provisions on illegitimacy, gender equality, marital

¹³⁹ *1918 VTsIK*, pp. 150–152.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153; Goikhbarg, “Pervyi Kodeks Zakonov RSFSR,” p. 8.

obligations, and divorce surpassed the legislation of any other country. The Code drew freely on the Marxist vision of family relations in its emphasis on freedom, independence, and equality of both spouses. More important, the jurists who drafted the Code viewed its progressive and libertarian features as but a first step toward the eventual withering away of the family and the law. According to Goikhbarg's confident prediction, "We must accept this [code] knowing that it is not a socialist measure, because socialist legislation will hardly exist. Only limited norms will remain."¹⁴¹

Conclusion

It took seven centuries for the demand for free union to evolve from the Brethren of the Free Spirit, who claimed an Edenite innocence but showed no desire to liberate Eve, to the Bolshevik vision of women's emancipation and independence. The four components of this Marxist vision – free union, women's liberation through waged labor, the socialization of housework, and the withering away of the family – did not come together until women began to enter the wage labor force in large numbers and an older gender division of labor began to crumble. At this point, a great struggle ensued between the advocates of male working-class prerogatives and the growing ranks of women workers. The ideas of Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Zetkin were worked out on this battlefield.

Historically, no individual or group – religious, philosophical, feminist, or utopian socialist – was capable of mounting an effective challenge to the gender division of labor before capitalism began undermining the family as the basic unit of production. The religious sectaries and the philosophes could not even conceive of such a challenge, the feminist voices of the French Revolution were weak and isolated, the revolutionary Jacobins scorned women's issues, and the early utopian socialists communalized but did not equalize. It was not until the rapid industrial changes of capitalism propelled massive numbers of women into the workforce and systematically undermined the social roles of

¹⁴¹ 1918 *VTsIK*, p. 153.

women in the family that a new vision of women's liberation arose to answer the needs of a mass audience. For despite the difficulties created by female wage labor, it was this fact, above all others, that created the preconditions for women's independence, for a rethinking of gender roles, and for a new conception of the family, in short, for a new material foundation for women's liberation.

The Bolsheviks strongly emphasized waged labor as a prerequisite for women's liberation precisely because the struggle to incorporate female labor into the working-class movement was central to working-class women's equality in the nineteenth century. Their commitment to the socialization of housework and the withering away of the family were direct responses to capitalism's assault on the family and traditional gender roles. Female waged labor and its attendant consequences provided the link between the various components of the Bolshevik vision.

If certain components of the Bolshevik vision were a response to relatively recent transformations, others were age-old. Revolutionaries had long envisioned various forms of free union and debated their implications for women. The practice of free union had repeatedly given rise to criticism that a lack of legal protection exacerbated the vulnerability of women and children. The radical religious sects of the English Revolution, the utopian socialist movement, and prerevolutionary Russian radical circles had all struggled with this problem in an attempt to put their ideals into practice. The same arguments were replicated again, with uncanny similarity, between Bebel and Engels, Kollontai and Lenin, and the Soviet libertarians and their more conservative counterparts. Like their historical forebears, Soviet proponents of unfettered sexuality met their critics in the defenders of women and children. The issues of free sexuality and women's vulnerability were to become crucial determinants in the direction of Soviet family policy.

By 1918, the Bolsheviks stood heir to a multifaceted vision of women's liberation rooted in a long revolutionary tradition. They had taken the first decisive steps toward their ideals in a new Family Code that radically broke with the laws and mores of their country's past. It remained to be seen what would happen to the revolutionary vision now that the revolutionaries actually held power.