

Response to Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology . . .”

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The first grave mistake Mr. Benenson made was to discuss Marx alone “as a matter of stylistic convenience.”¹ If you leave out Engels, you miss all the fun. You want a fascinating past starring women, you have to memorize *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

Long ago, before history, women ruled a world created by what Gordon Childe called the Neolithic Revolution. We sat with a cat on our lap in front of the loom we invented (the most elaborate piece of machinery of the era), with a pot (whose chemical changes we had scientifically mastered) in the kiln and bread in the oven, looking out at sources of wealth called gardens and orchards, which we tended and whose secrets of creation we had discovered. Of course, we did not neglect to laugh with the baby in the skin cradle. Mothers managed the matrilineal clans and indulged the men who likes to hunt and mess around with sheep, or were those things cattle? Women controlled the relations of production. Engels insisted on this happily-ever-before: a world where home and work were the same place, the household; where the necessities of life were gleaned from each according to her ability to people according to their needs; a peaceful, classless society, organized in extended family units with mother presiding. What happened to that fine, fair world? Did the “world historical defeat of the female sex” result from a real war between the sexes like the one deliciously described by Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères*?² Not at all. It was more like a teary tiff we had with men between tea and dinner, all resolved before we went to bed. There was no armed struggle. The mothers sold out for the love of one good man.³

And then we get to war and the plow and irrigated agriculture, and slaves and cities and classes and finally to the Industrial Revolution, where men ran us and everything else. It is at this point Mr. Benenson implies that Marx wanted working women to sell out *again*. Mr. Benenson fails to distinguish *is* from *ought*. If, in Marx’s day, working men clamored for a living wage for their families, and working women dreamed of staying home, Marx was a keen enough observer to perceive it. Those were workers’ own solutions to the problems of an agonizing, exploitive present. But Marx did not prescribe a proper Victorian homebody vocation for women. Marx prescribed revolution.

After the revolution, the next stage would be, for the first time, a world of equality, economic and legal and political equality for men and women. Engels suggested a concrete process for the emancipation of women after the revolution:

. . . to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything by an insignificant amount of time.⁴

Wage slavery is superseded by a just economic system, and household drudgery is abolished by socialized, industrialized domestic services. Marxist theory *never* preached that woman's place should be in the home. Marxist women must work and make revolution. And, all through the ages, women are seen to be deeply involved in not staying home and in making hay or history.

Finally, Marxist theory is supposed to move, always to deal with how things change. That figure of the male breadwinner in *Capital* is presented as a characteristic of a stage of capitalism. Men were not at all the breadwinners in the Neolithic, nor will they be the sole breadwinners come the revolution. Similarly, Marxist theory is not supposed to be a fixed and static piece of orthodoxy programmed to give the answers to everything. There is plenty left to figure out, as Mr. Benenson has said. But that is not a critique of Marxist social theory. Its power is such that we keep coming back to it for direction, not necessarily for the peculiarities of detail, but rather for its rigor, for its quest for deeply-rooted material structures that affect people, and for its precept: if it doesn't change, it isn't history. David Montgomery is right: "Marx's theoretical advice points us closer to the mark than does Benenson's."⁵

NOTES

1. ILWCH 25, 19, n. 2.
2. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Kay (New York: Viking, 1971).
3. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* 1884, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 116–121. OK, so he said chastity and monogomy. See also V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* 1936 (New York: Mentor, 1951), Chapter 5.
4. Engles, 221.
5. ILWCH 25, 28.