

Early Marxist Explorations into the

"WOMAN QUESTION"

by SUDDHABRATA DEB ROY



Reflections on the Early Feminism of Friedrich Engels and August Bebel

by
SUDDHABRATA
DEB ROY

"For there can be no liberation of mankind without social independence and equality of the sexes."

—August Bebel, *Women and Socialism*

"The overthrow of the mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex."

—Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*



Anti-socialists have, time and again, brought serious allegations against Marxism, railing against its supposed inability to develop a holistic framework for understanding different expressions of oppression. One of the most repeated allegations stemming from the liberal “left” claims that Marxism is insensitive to gender oppression; the truth, however, is that questions of gender have been fervently discussed within the Marxist tradition from its beginnings. From the early through to the contemporary Marxists, many have, in their own way, attempted to address the question of gender. Some have been highly influential like the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, while still others have been

mercilessly critiqued.

The early feminist movement revolved around the question of women’s rights while most of the recent literature on women’s movement are advocacies in favour of women’s liberation (Goldstein, 1982). While both terms might appear similar at the superficial level, there are grave distinctions between the two. The narrative about women’s rights is mostly circumscribed around the bourgeois conception of rights which rarely transgresses to include working-class women within its fold. The women’s liberation movement on the other hand, advocates for a social movement in favour of a complete overhaul of the social system oppressing women, which may or may not be socialist or communist in nature.

Utopian Socialism was, in its own way, the initiator of the discussion on women's rights and liberation within the broad socialist tradition. The utopian socialist Charles Fourier was one of the pioneers in highlighting the issues of women in socialist discourse. Fourier advocated for a form of socialism whereby progress is determined by the progress made by women in that society (Marx, 1844). Fourier was an ardent advocate of the dissolution of the institution of family (Marx, 1963), a position retained by the early socialist August Bebel during the course of his analysis of the position of women within society. Taking his cue from the utopian socialism of Fourier, Marx (1846/2012) discussed how the capitalist mode of production, realized through new technologies, techniques, and methods of organizing labor, prompted the employment of women and children. However, it was Engels (1884/1941) who exhibited how this development laid a foundation for women's liberation by forcing previously unorganised women workers dive into the general structure of the organised workers' movements. And even prior to Engels, August Bebel openly voiced support for the liberation of women when he declared women to be labourers who were bounded by slavery well before the modern institution of slavery existed (Bebel, 1879/1910). Bebel, like Engels, was a pioneer in the theorisation of women's oppression in socialist discourse. Highly critical of the reduced capacity of contemporary socialists to recognize that the dependence of women on men developed along a similar line as the dependence of workers on capital, Bebel

argued that the realisation of socialism was impossible without the upliftment of women politically and socially in public service.

The present article offers a critical look at these two early Marxist thinkers and their work on the question of gender oppression. The two principal works which shall be discussed are Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and August Bebel's *Women and Socialism*. These two works, published within a span of five years, served as the major source of theorisation for the early, and even contemporary, socialist movement on the question of women's labour. Engels and Bebel each used common resources to produce their theses on the oppression of women. One such common point of reference is the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan. Morgan's *Ancient Society*, first published in 1877, theorised on the evolution of family, government, and property. Both Engels and Bebel studied Morgan's work while forming their respective theories on the evolution of human societies, attempting to analyse the question of women's labour through a paradigm which formulates that the deplorable conditions in which women found themselves was an aftereffect of socio-economic changes during the transition to capitalism. This paradigm has been continuously, and contentiously, debated by later Marxists and feminists alike.

The present paper shall not critique the controversies of economism, analyse the broader political theory of August Bebel, or remark on the potential rivalry between

Fredrich Engels and August Bebel. Instead, we shall consider their theories about the oppression of women within their own theoretical universes. While true that neither Engels nor Bebel proposed a programmatic alternative for the women's movement, they produced a lasting accomplishment: establishing a materialist theoretical basis for the further investigation of the "woman question."

The Impact of the *Woman Question* on the Socialism of August Bebel

August Bebel, born in 1840, was one of the pioneers of the socialist movement in Germany. He founded the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany in 1869 which subsequently evolved into the Social Democratic Party of Germany in 1890. August Bebel was one of the first socialists to openly discuss the position and importance of women in the socialist movement and society in general. In fact, gender was a central element in August Bebel's analysis of class society. For Bebel, social and sex relations were fundamental to national development.¹ Women, to Bebel, were the first slaves in human history.² His conceptualisation of the practical enslavement of women within and beyond the household in ancient societies led to the most revolutionary aspect of August Bebel's study: the proclamation that women were the first workers into servitude (Bebel, 1910: 10).

Coming from a nascent socialist tradition which had, at least partially, severed ties with the utopian socialists, Bebel insisted

all forms of oppression and dependence were rooted within the economic foundation of society. Gender was critical because of its role in the division of labour at a very early stage of human civilisation, long before economic oppression per se actually came into existence. He clearly discarded the ahistorical conception that considered modern social formations as appearing with humans at the moment of creation and instead argued that it was only through a gradual evolution of the social order that human civilization proper came into existence. In doing so, Bebel, critiqued the role of both the church and the ruling class in establishing





a base upon which the modern oppression of women could be construed as an accepted social fact in the Durkheimian sense.

Bebel's *Women and Socialism*,³ first published in German in 1879, is a pivotal source for understanding the early socialist approach towards the gender question. Bebel, in many ways, was ahead of his time as far as the question of 'women' was concerned. His theorisation of gender as fundamentally intertwined with the labour question provided one of the first detailed materialist exploration into the subject. Bebel explained that the question of gender oppression was a reflection of the conflict between capitalists and workers, and the question of the women's movement was intertwined with the broader labour

movement. This is not to say that Bebel did not recognize that the oppression of women did, to some extent, cut across class divisions. Thus he opined that women from different social classes could potentially organize behind a common movement against the broadest expressions of patriarchy, but nonetheless, such an alliance could only subsist temporarily against the mounting pressure of the intensified class antagonisms characteristic of industrial capitalism. It is significant that Bebel saw in the working women's movement a force which was potentially more potent in its revolutionary spirit than the working men's movement,⁴ primarily because the women's movement developed under the influence of a social position more deeply oppressed in comparison to working class men. The basic aim of the socialist approach towards women's struggle and liberation was succinctly put forward by Bebel,

"Our Goal then is, not only to achieve equality of men and women under the present social order, which constitutes the sole aim of bourgeois woman's movement, but to go far beyond this, and to remove all barriers that make one human being dependent upon another, which includes the dependence of one sex upon the other." (Bebel, 1910: 7)

Aspects of Bebel's thought remain relevant to this day. His analysis of the variable rate of infanticide relative to social class provides a dramatic example of the effect of poverty on the family structure. His study of the interrelationship between prostitution, employment status, the legality of

women's labour, and the rentier economy offers an explanation of how patriarchal capitalism operates across multiple levels.⁵ It is popularly accepted that prostitution, for the majority of women involved, derives from economic compulsion rather than free choice, a notion which Bebel advanced. Bebel argued that working class women not only experienced precarious, dangerous, and exploitative labor conditions under industrial capitalism, but that this general condition was further exacerbated by substantial legal, cultural, and social obstacles. Thus, under significant socioeconomic pressure during the rise of capitalism, women were forcibly driven into prostitution and other lumpen conditions. Such a claim appears to offer a direct counter to the class nature of the contemporary practice of 'slut-shaming',⁶ which mostly targets poor and working class women. Further, Bebel critiqued the cultural orientation whereby polygamy is seen as a natural inclination but polyandry an unthinkable sin, recognizing it as a reflection in the economic subordination of women. He established how the legal apparatus ultimately sides with the dominant forces of a given society, such as in the case of criminalization of prostitution within 19th Century German society championed by landlords and other members of high society.⁷ Here, there appears to be a striking continuity with the denial of legal status and labor protections, and in turn, social dignity, to sex workers today.

Bebel's greatest contributions to the socialist conception of women's rights and liberation stemmed from his detailed insights into the means through which social and political institutions ultimately

served the patriarchal ruling class by facilitating the oppression, vilification, and control of women. The conceptualisation of women as a potent and distinct revolutionary force had larger implications for how socialists would come to view and analyse other questions of identity related to race, caste, and other categories. Bebel's work continues to provide Marxists with a theoretical foundation in which women's oppression can be situated within a material-economic base.

The Woman Question in the Work of Friedrich Engels

For most of his intellectual life, Friedrich Engels was overshadowed by the brilliance of his collaborator and comrade, Karl Marx, in collaboration with whom he created a massive assemblage of socioeconomic and political literature aimed at the international emancipation of the working class. Born in 1820, Engels was a social scientist, journalist, and businessman, and no less brilliant than Marx regardless of his humility on the matter. Engels was the first Marxist per se, played a critical role in sustaining the Marx family through difficult times, and after the death of Marx, played a key role in translating and publishing the work of his closest comrade.

Engels, himself was a prolific theorist on his own. Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*⁸ published in 1884, a year after the death of Karl Marx, has been the basic theoretical vantage from which nearly all subsequent



Marxists begin when delving into questions on sexuality and family but nonetheless it contains numerous critical insights on the historic processes that would give rise to contemporary problems ranging from ecological disaster to economic crisis. The brilliance of Engels was that, though his investigation centered primarily on the historic development of private property, he provided a theoretical basis for unearthing the intersectional causes of gender oppression, and further, how the emancipation of women is, in addition to other factors, not only a fundamental component of socialist revolution but also a potential causal factor in its development.

The Marxist conception of species-essence (Gattungswesen), as laid out by Marx (1844) in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, portrays the species-beingness of humankind as an inherent quality of humanity which allows them to both care and work for the development of society in its totality, not simply for private, personal benefit. Engels laid bare some of the more basic concepts regarding how the Marxist notion of species-essence can be realised in actually-existing society: two of the most fundamental criteria being mutual toleration and freedom from jealousy.⁹

Engels, through the application of these two criteria, attempted to analyse two prime aspects of Marx's theory, which would later emerge as fundamental in contemporary labour struggles: namely competition and struggle between the classes. While doing so, Engels brought forward how the first quality contributed towards the stabilisation of the loose family structure in the stage of existence of group marriage,¹⁰ which itself left little room for the factor of jealousy to intervene within loose familial structures. However, these quasi-promiscuous marital relationships were a foundation upon which the first accepted form of family was based: that is, the Consanguine Family; or, more simply put, a familial structure based upon restricted inter-generational group marriage. This structure, with its subsequent evolution into the Punaluan structure and then to the Pairing family structure, formed the basis upon which the modern monogamous familial structure was constructed. It was this phase of human

development which saw the rise of conception of wealth and, also, to a certain extent, budding privatisation. Through a description of how the conception of wealth and private property came into existence, Engels brought forward the relation between the evolution of wealth and private property as a societal measure of the importance--and class--of human beings and the domination of women by men, which was itself a central element in all marital arrangements. In other words, even though wealth became the central social concern of human civilisation (Vogel, 1996) it did not have an independent ontological existence of its own, but was, rather, part of a shared ontological space which was based upon the oppression of women and the appropriation of the fruits of women's labour by men within the family, and within society in general.

Referring to the dynamic system of the division of labour within the family, Engels provided his readers with a detailed historical and social understanding of the importance of means of production in the development of the society to its present form. The division of labour within the family was pretty straightforward during the days of the pairing family structure. Men were entrusted with the responsibility of producing food and the requisite instruments of production, while women were entrusted with household responsibilities. Engels discussed the dominant system of inheritance at that time, by stating that:

“At first, according to mother-right – so long, therefore, as descent was reckoned only in the female line – and according to the original custom of inheritance within the gens, the gentile relatives inherited from a deceased fellow member of their gens. His property had to remain within the gens. His effects being insignificant, they probably always passed in practice to his nearest gentile relations – that is, to his blood relations on the mother's side. The children of the dead man, however, did not belong to his gens, but to that of their mother; it was from her that they inherited, at first conjointly with her other blood relations, later perhaps with rights of priority; they could not inherit from their father, because they did not belong to his gens, within which his property had to remain. When the owner of the herds died, therefore, his herds would go first to his brothers and sisters and to his sister's children, or to the issue of his mother's sisters. But his own children were disinherited.” (Engels, 1941: 57)

With the world-historical looming-in of cattle domestication, as well as the use of slaves in primitive forms of agriculture, men subsequently became the owners of the means of subsistence, which then cleared the route for the male members of a family being the heads of those families. The complete invisibilisation of women's household labour was, in part, a result of these changes in the division of labour within the family, which then subsequently impregnated the entirety of human society.

Related to these alterations were changes to the system of inheritance as well. The usage of the term mother-right throughout *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* reflected Engels' study of Bachofen.¹¹ Engels, however, in the later part of this work, critiqued the usage of the word "right" within the historical context on which the book was based.¹² The social power of the legal system, if not the conceptualisation of legality itself, was alien to early civilization. Regardless, Engels recognized the rudimentary development of what would become the legal apparatus, and the relative influence it had on the course of development. The continuous transfer of power from women to men was an historical event which occurred as men increased their hold over the means of social life, i.e, production.

Correspondingly, there developed a full-fledged competition regarding the identity of the heir of familial wealth, which under existing systems would go to the mother's children and not the father's. Ultimately, this competition was, perhaps unsurprisingly, won by the same gender

that consolidated control over the means of production that were used in the production of material wealth. Engels, as well as Bebel, argued that even after private property had penetrated into human society, some tribes still clung to the mother-right system of inheritance. However, as the influence of religion and corresponding conceptions of morality developed, they would act as one of the most critical triggers of the near-universal shift from mother-right to father-right.

Engels, did not restrict his analysis of gender to 'only gender' but rather used his analysis of the woman question to bring forward aspects of socialist theory that were related to more general characteristics of society, both economically and socio-politically. The transfer of the 'mother-right' to the 'father-right,' was, according to Engels, itself a revolution.¹³ The historical shift in inheritance laws coupled with the emergent importance of cooperation and coordination between various tribes created a fertile ground for what Engels called, "...the world historical defeat of the female sex." (Engels, 1941:59)

Conclusion: Engels and Bebel in Contemporary Light

Both Bebel and Engels were highly critical of the social institutions which reproduced conditions of social oppression. Bebel's thesis that the legal apparatus plays a critical role in the suppression of marginalized sections of society is complemented by Engels'

historic analysis of the development of legal power. Building on their work, contemporary Marxists have further developed an intersectional framework of social theory, maintaining the dynamic centrality of class without falling into a one-sided reductionism. Indeed, the Marxist approach to gender-based oppression is unique because it does not stem from a framework which accepts and attempts to reform the existing social order; instead, it analyzes and attacks the very foundation of capitalist society which gives rise not only to the exploitation of one class by another, but to a renewed expression of patriarchy whereby the exploitation and oppression of women by men is mediated through evermore complex mechanisms.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, early Marxists addressed the oppression of women both urgently and seriously, in direct contradiction to the ahistorical claims of its liberal opponents. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that Engels and Bebel, and even Marx himself, were bound by the conditions of their time and could only advance so far beyond the theoretical and ideological confines of their environment. It would take the active experience of socialist revolution to further clarify the conditions for women's liberation.

Endnotes

1. See Bebel, August (1910), *Women and Socialism*. Published by Socialist Literature Co., pp. 16
2. Bebel, *Ibid.*, pp.10
3. "Women and Socialism" was subsequently translated by Daniel de Leon and published by the Socialist Labor Party of America in the United States of America under the title "Women under Socialism." Although largely the same, in "Women under Socialism", De Leon distanced himself from Bebel's attack on marriage as an institution.
4. Bebel, *Ibid.*, pp.6
5. Bebel, *Ibid.*, pp. 195
6. For a brief exploration into Slut-Shaming, one can visit https://www.huffpost.com/entry/slutshaming-hurts-every-w_n_5529086 ,or <https://inews.co.uk/essentials/someone-sent-photo-work-heading-slag-history-slut-shaming-92523>
7. Bebel, *Ibid.*, pp. 195
8. "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" by Friedrich Engels is considered to be the major materialist account of the history and economics of the institution of family and its relation with the oppression of women. It was based heavily on the notes compiled by Karl Marx in his "Ethnological Notebooks" on Lewis Morgan's "Ancient Society".
9. See Engels (1941), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Published by Lawrence and Wishart Limited, pp. 33
10. Engels, *Ibid.*, pp. 34
11. See Engels, *ibid.*, pp. 41. The reference is to the Swiss academic and anthropologist Johann Jacob Bachofen, who is famous for his theorisation of the history of matriarchy. Engels was

appreciative of his 1861 book titled “Mother-Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World”, which he regularly referred to.

12. Engels, *Ibid.*, pp. 41

13. Engels, *Ibid.*, pp. 58

Marx, K. (1963). *Private Property and Communism*. In T. Bottomore (Ed), *Early Writings*. London: Penguin

Vogel, L. (1996). *Engels’s Origin: Legacy, Burden and Vision*. In C.J. Arthur (Ed.), *Engels Today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

References

Bebel, A. (1879/1910). *Women and Socialism*. New York: Socialist Literature Co.

Engels, F. (1884/1941). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. London : Lawrence and Wishart Limited.

Goldstein, L.F. (1982). *Early Feminist Themes in French Utopian Socialism: The St.-Simonians and Fourier*. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43(1),pp.91-108

Lenin, V.I. (1917). *Letter on Tactics*. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x01.htm#fwV24E019>

Lewenhak, S. (1977). *Women and Trade Unions*. London: Ernest Benn Limited

Marx,K. (1844). *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>

Marx, K. (1844/2009). *The Holy Family*. Kolkata: National Book Agency

Marx, K. (1846/2012). *The German Ideology*. New Delhi: Peoples’ Publishing House

Marx, K. (1867/2015). *Capital Volume 1*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books





**МЫ
ОБЕЩАЕМ
РАБОЧИМ
И КРЕСТЬЯНАМ
СДЕЛАТЬ ВСЁ
ДЛЯ МИРА.**

**И
МЫ
ЭТО
СДЕЛАЕМ.**



ЛЕНИН

