

# Feminist Questions About Marxist Theory

*This article was written by the National Women's Committee (NWC) of the Canadian marxist-leninist organization In Struggle!, and was first published in the March-April-May, 1982 special issue on women of Proletarian Unity (No. 26). For the NWC there are two major theoretical questions concerning the special oppression of women that must be addressed if In Struggle! is to develop an effective Program:*

1. *What is the nature and role of the contradictions between women and men; and how are these contradictions articulated with the class contradiction?*

2. *What is a genuine revolutionary strategy for women's liberation?*

*Writing to clarify the issues central to women's situation in advanced capitalist countries, and criticizing the traditional marxist approach that they find prevalent within In Struggle!, the Committee has drawn on the work of Radical and Socialist feminists to help identify the problems of marxist theory in this area. While they do not claim to have investigated the issues involved sufficiently to come to definitive conclusions, the NWC has tentatively put forward ideas they hope will reconcile marxism and feminism. [Proletarian Unity, May First Distribution, 1407 d'Iberville, Montreal, Quebec H2K 3B1, single copies \$2.50; 1 year subscription: \$12.00.]*

## The Role of Domestic Labour

Many feminists have accused Marxism of being both sex-blind and sexist. We would like to give a few examples to back up this charge.

Batya Weinbaum<sup>1</sup> examines Marx's *Capital* in light of its omissions concerning the division of labour by sex and age. She feels that this is the patriarchal component of Marxism.

First, in discussing how to determine the value of labour power, Marx continually refers to *the average laborer, a concept which is interchangeable with that of the average male adult*, and although he admits that "The employment of these different sorts of labour power (that of men and women, children and adults—Ed. note). . . makes a great difference in the cost of maintaining the family of the laborer, and in the value of the labour power of the adult male," he continues by saying "[This] factor, however, is excluded from the following investigation."<sup>2</sup>

If men, women and children are paid unequal wages, then there is no *average* laborer. What have we gained by saying that the average laborer earns \$5 an hour, when the man earns \$9, the woman earns \$4 and an adolescent earns \$2? We have only obscured the differences, so that we cannot see how the capitalist system benefits from them.

Later in the same volume, Marx explains how the individual worker exchanges his wages against the means of subsistence and that "he supplies himself with the necessaries in order to maintain his labour power."<sup>3</sup>

What Marx doesn't indicate is that one of the things which the male worker needs to maintain his labour power is a wife. In fact the whole question of domestic labour and its relationship to the economy is absent from Marx's analysis.

But women's unpaid, individual domestic labour is obviously essential in the reproduction of male labour power. What is perhaps not as obvious is how it is also important for capitalist profits. Many feminists have been examining the economics of women's domestic labour and one particularly interesting analysis tries to demonstrate how "the existence of domestic labour lowers the value of labour-power by lowering the costs of reproduction to the capitalist . . . . Thus, although domestic labour is not part of the value of labour-power its existence means an increase in the ratio of surplus to necessary labour."<sup>4</sup> So, free housework means capitalists can pay lower wages and in difficult economic conditions wages can even fall below the amount necessary to reproduce workers' labour-power since housewives can use more of their own labour power and less money to feed, clothe and clean their family. For example, they can repair and transform old clothes rather than buy new ones, and make all their meals from scratch rather than buying prepared foods or ordering Kentucky Fried Chicken.

## The Reproduction of the Species and Male Domination

A second major area of omission in Marxist theory is the absence of an analysis of the reproduction of the species—the physical, psychological and emotional caring for children, their socialization and education, and the reproduction of the social relations within which capitalism operates.

Since Engels stated one hundred years ago that "According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life . . . The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch live is determined by both kinds of production."<sup>5</sup> Marxists have stopped examining how the family, the site of the reproduction of the species, determines social organization. On the contrary, for them, the reproduction of the species and its organization in the family does not structure society, but is relegated to the superstructure and the sphere of ideology, and the relations of reproduction have now to be understood by examining the relations of production.

A final example of omission in Marxist theory which we would like to underline is the total absence of an analysis of the system of the domination of men over women. This system, which is often referred to as the patriarchal or sex-gender system, is seen by feminists as something separate and distinct from the exploitation and oppression of the capitalist system and the other modes of production. Some indications that male domination and capitalist oppression are not one and the same include: the fact that male domination has existed through all modes of production and crosses all other divisions, be they class, race or nation—how else can we explain that it is always women who are relegated to the private sphere and to the bottom ladder in the public sphere, that all social institutions are controlled by men? It is clear that men benefit from women's labour. All men, relative to the women of their class, race or nation, have a higher quality of life in terms of the amount of free time available to them and the personalized services they receive at home. Men thus have a material interest in women's oppression. All men, no matter what their place in the system, can control at least some women. How can we explain that after an economic change, with the destruction of the private ownership of the means of production, private domestic labour is not socialized and the family still exists as an economic unit and is even reinforced, thus maintaining women's oppression?

## Is Private Property the Source of Women's Oppression?

Here we have then a few examples of the errors and omissions to be found in Marxist theory concerning the oppression of women.

But Marxism is not completely silent about women's oppression. Marxists recognize the sexual division of the working class and see it as an obstacle to the unity of workers. Unfortunately, their solution is still the same one as was put forward by Engels one hundred years ago—the massive introduction of women into social production and the socialization of domestic tasks. This has led to a belief that women will be "returned" to a position of equality by the destruction of the private property system, as if this were a natural process of history.

To see how Engels arrived at this conclusion, let us look at his understanding of the origin of women's oppression. Engels believed that in primitive societies, there was no inequality between the sexes. Rather, there was a natural

division of labour but it did not lead to any form of exploitation or oppression.

With the development of productive forces (the domestication of wild animals and the possibility of raising crops) leading to the possibility of accumulating a surplus, came the development of private ownership of the means of production and the division of society into antagonistic classes. This then led to the development of the patriarchal family and the State.

The development of the productive forces gave rise to a new division of labour where women's production had only private domestic use value while men's activities had exchange value. The new property which men acquired through their control of the means of production had to be transmitted to men's own descendants. For this, the monogamy of women was essential. This led to a reversal of maternal right (children belong to the mother) and the establishment of conjugal marriage, monogamy and the domination of men over women and children.

Since Engels developed this theory, many anthropologists and feminists have contested many of his basic premises. Is it true that the work women did in primitive societies had only use value? Why was it women's labour which couldn't produce exchange value?

Here, briefly, as a few elements of reply:

Karen Sacks indicates that Engels made a number of specific ethnographic errors: "Engels believed that men were always the collectors or producers of subsistence. It has since become clear that for gathering-hunting societies the reverse is closer to the norm (Lee and DeVone, 1968); and for horticultural societies, it is often the women's horticultural activities which are the basis for subsistence (see Judith Brown in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*). Engels also believed that the domestication of animals preceded the cultivation of the soil. Today, as a result of more recent research, a more commonly accepted theory is that cultivation and pastoralism developed at the same time."<sup>6</sup>

Antoine Artous, in his article on the family,<sup>7</sup> explains how before the development of a market economy, it was women who produced pottery and handicrafts since these products were related to their tasks of cooking and working around the home. But when these products acquired exchange value, this work was taken over by men.

How was it, then, that men were able to take over the production of surplus wealth and control the means of production?

To answer this question, we have to take a closer look at the so-called "natural division of labour" between the sexes. With this division, women are exclusively responsible for the care of young children. This prevents them from participating in hunting which would take them too far away from the home.

Kathleen Gough feels that male power over women in hunting societies "springs from the male monopoly of heavy weapons, from the particular division of labour between the sexes, or from both. Although men seldom use weapons against women, they possess them (or possess superior weapons) in addition to their physical strength . . . Probably because of male co-operation in defence and hunting, men are more prominent in band councils and leadership, in medicine and magic, and in public rituals."<sup>8</sup>



Other anthropologists feel there is no proof that a genuine matriarchal society ever existed nor is there evidence that a matrilineal system always preceded a patrilineal one—a sequence which is essential to Engels' arguments, which state that the patrilineal system developed when men needed to transmit their property to their sons.

Still other anthropologists feel that men began to dominate women in primitive societies because they wanted to control women's reproduction and kin relations because of the low development of productive forces which made human labour power, and thus children, the first social wealth and the main means of production.

With so many questions being raised about the basic foundations of Engels' theory on the origin of women's oppression, it is obvious that we are going to have to take a second look at the solutions he proposed as a result of his theory.

## The Solutions . . .

The first solution put forward is *the massive entry of women into social production*. On this point, what is often forgotten is that socialism does not change the fact that the work world into which women enter has been organized and structured for and by men. It is a male world and a world in which there is a clear sexual division in which women are relegated to jobs in feminine ghettos, where they do work which is nothing but an extension of their domestic tasks at home. It is a world where women are on the bottom rung, be it in terms of wages, work conditions or possibilities of promotion.

Can women be integrated into social production on an equal basis? First of all, we have to ask ourselves the question, what equality are we talking about? Does women's equality simply mean the right to work? Does it mean the possibility of becoming like a man, where men and male characteristics are taken as the norm which women must attain and all incapacities on the part of women to do so are seen as being personal character deficiencies?

But perhaps the most important problem remains that women will never have any kind of equality in social production and society in general as long as the sexual division of labour within the family is not attacked.

It is true that the classical Marxist programme calls for the *socialization of domestic tasks* to liberate women from this burden. But the abolition of private ownership does not automatically lead to the transformation of private domestic labour into a social industry. Domestic labour will not leave the private home on its own accord. It will take a specific struggle to socialize it.

Even so, the socialization of these tasks requires a strong, well-organized economic base, for the monetary costs are enormous. It is estimated that domestic production accounts for 33% of the gross national product. A study in Sweden showed that 2340 million hours per year are devoted to domestic labour, compared to 1290 million to industrial production. And we have just to think of how governments in advanced capitalist countries are so hard-pressed to set up even a few day-care centers, because of the tremendous financial investment.

To date, in countries which have undergone "socialist" revolutions, technology has first been used to increase productivity and reduce human labour in the most important masculine fields. Socializing domestic labour through the use of technology has not been an economic priority.<sup>9</sup>

Another area which will have to be investigated is the biological reproduction function of women. This function has never been seen by Marxists as a factor contributing to women's inequality. It has been thought that socialism would create ideal conditions for producing children who would be taken in hand by the society.

But Marxists have underestimated the complexity of the parent-child relationship, especially concerning the mother. What does it mean that children will be taken in hand by society? Will we promote the idea of test-tube babies who enter a nursery from the day they are born and never have a special relationship with particular adults? If not, what responsibilities will be left with the biological parents and their entourage?

How are we going to assure women's control over their bodies and their reproduction? In practice, in every "socialist" country in the world, there has been a tug-of-war between women's rights and population requirements. Either mothers are strongly encouraged to produce children for the socialist motherland, or, as is the case in China, they are punished for doing so. Depending on the population needs of the country, abortion and contraception are widely accessible or almost illegal. Women's rights have a tendency to come second behind the needs of "socialism."

Finally, if we admit that we can not totally socialize all aspects of domestic labour and child care, how are we going to wage the struggle so that men give up some of their free time to share this work? For if women are going to be equal, men will have to renounce their privileges. And this is a struggle which must be begun today. We do not believe that men will suddenly see the light of day after the revolution.

<sup>1</sup> Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism*, South End Press, 1978, pp. 34-46.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, p. 351. International Publishers, New York, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 571-73.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Holmstrom, "Women's Work and Capitalism," in *Science and Society*, No. 45, Summer 1981, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Preface to the First Edition, International Publishers, 1972, pp. 71-72.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Reiter, Monthly Review Press, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine Artous, "Systeme capitaliste et oppression des femmes," in *Critique Communiste*, numero special, ler trimestre, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Gough, "The Origin of the Family," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Reiter, Monthly Review Press, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Hilda Scott, *Women and Socialism: Experiences from Eastern Europe*, Alison and Busby Ltd., 1976.