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## Frederick Engels, Social Reproduction, and the Problem of a Unitary Theory of Women’s Oppression

*Paul Blackledge*

**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that Frederick Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* remains a fundamental resource for anyone wanting to understand the oppression of women as a capitalist form. By re-examining the strengths and weaknesses of Engels’s historicisation of women’s oppression through the lens of the debates opened by second wave feminism, I argue that, once properly understood, we can overcome the limitations of Engels’s book to point to the kind of unitary theory of women’s oppression essential to a strategy adequate to the needs of the struggle for women’s liberation.

**Keywords:** Marxism, Engels, women’s oppression, intersectionality, social reproduction, feminism

By bringing into focus the question of how the oppression of women relates to broader issues of class power the #MeToo movement has opened a space for a renewed dialogue between Marxism and feminism.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I argue that Frederick Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* remains a fundamental resource for anyone wanting to understand the oppression of women as a capitalist form. By re-examining the strengths and weaknesses of Engels’s historicisation of women’s oppression through the lens of the debates opened by second wave feminism, I argue that, once properly understood, we can overcome the limitations of his arguments to point to a unitary theory of women’s oppression as a capitalist form. Further, I argue that this project is an essential prerequisite of a strategy adequate to the needs of the struggle for human liberation.

The appeal of Engels’s *Origin* to generations of socialists and feminists is not difficult to understand. As Randall Collins noted at the centenary of its first publication, *Origin* made a “pivotal” contribution to sociological theory by historicising the family and sexual relations (Collins 1994: 80). It consequently marked a powerful challenge to what Martha Gimenez calls, the “taken for granted” textbook criticisms of Marxism that tend, absurdly, to find it guilty of “economism, class reductionism, and sex blind categories of analy-

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sis” (Gimenez 2001). Moreover, Engels’s contribution to developing a historical understanding of women’s oppression alongside his revolutionary critique of capitalism ensured that *Origin* became a major point of reference for what Susan Watkins calls “the starburst of original thinking that exploded with the 1970s women’s liberation movement” (Watkins 2018: 50). If Engels’s reputation waned as feminism morphed from the 1970s women’s liberation movement that aimed to “overthrow the existing order” into what Watkins calls “anti-discrimination” feminism whose goal is to “induct women into” that order (Watkins 2018: 11–12), by radicalising the critique of gendered capitalism the #MeToo movement has opened a space for feminists to re-engage with his ideas.

This paper is written in the hope that the radicalisation of contemporary feminism will indeed bring it into contact with Marx and Engels’s critique of capitalism, and the belief that by unpicking what is living from what is dead in Engels’s analysis of the relationship between capitalism and women’s oppression we might facilitate such an encounter.

Amongst second wave socialist feminists Rosalind Delmar registered Engels’s importance as the author of one of the earliest attempts to theorise “women’s oppression as a problem of history, rather than of biology, a problem which should be the concern of historical materialism to analyse and revolutionary politics to solve” (Delmar quoted in Pelz 1998: 124). Similarly, Juliet Mitchell wrote that *Origin* “is probably still the most influential work in the field” while Michèle Barrett claimed that the book Karen Sacks called “the basic Marxist feminist statement” (Sacks 1982: 97) “provided the starting point of a materialist analysis of gender relations” (Mitchell 1974: 365; Barrett 2014: 48). Comparable appreciations of *Origins* continued well into the cultural turn. In 1987, Janet Sayers, Mary Evans, and Nanneke Redclift commented that “Engels is important to contemporary feminists because he offers the possibility of a materialist explanation for women’s subordination and attempts to establish a relationship between the ownership of private property and the ideological subordination of women” (Sayers, Evans, and Redclift 1987: 1). A decade later Carol Gould described *Origin* as “one of the first major contributions to the theoretical analysis and critique of women’s oppression” (Gould 1999: 253). In fact, despite the tendency for theory’s linguistic turn to marginalise the sort of historical materialist analysis that Engels pioneered (Ebert 2015: 353), his work continues to act as a significant point of reference for those seeking a materialist analysis of women’s oppression (German 2007; Gimenez 2005; Orr 2015; Smith 2015; Vogel 1996; Cotter 2007, 2008, 2012; Field 2016; Dee 2010; McGregor 2013). The appeal of Engels to these writers is in large part because, as Lynn Chancer and Beverly Xavier Watkins suggest, his book not only has an “ongoing explanatory resonance”

but within it there is also a tight fit between theory and practice (Chancer and Watkins 2006: 26).

Indeed, alongside Engels's attempt to historicise the emergence of women's oppression, he aimed to comprehend the relationship between class exploitation and gender oppression within contemporary capitalism with a view to underpinning a strategy adequate to challenge these evils. If the appeal of such a project in the context of the contemporary #MeToo movement is obvious enough, how it might improve on modern conceptions of intersectionality and privilege is less so.

Criticisms of Marx and Engels's supposed theoretical and practical reductionism are legion. For instance, in a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, Rebecca Solnit responded to the interviewer's charge—referencing Steve Bannon's dismissive claim that “the longer [the Democrats] talk about identity politics, I got 'em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats”—that the American left had failed to address issues of class by chastising the interviewer for using that “horrible, dismissive term ‘identity politics’ that Bernie Sanders and others used, which pretends that we're in a colour-blind, gender-blind society and it's all just economics.” To reinforce her criticism of the left around Sanders she added “[t]here is an old Marxist left that looks at class a lot and these other things very little” (Feroz-har 2018). This sort of criticism of Marxism is widespread on the left, and is evident, for instance, Adrienne Rich's worry that Marxism has been tainted by a fear that “class would erase gender” (Rich quoted in Holstrum 2002: 4).

Intersectionality and privilege theories, by contrast, seem to offer the possibility of illuminating the full complexity of oppressive and exploitative relations characteristic of modern capitalism. To this end Patricia Hill Collins aimed to map “the matrix of domination” through which the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (Collins 2000: 227–28), while Kimberle Crenshaw contributed to what she called “a broader collective effort among feminists of color to expand feminism to include analyses of race and other factors such as class, sexuality, and age” (Crenshaw 1991: 1244).

Clearly intersectionality theory was and remains a positive intellectual and political development within feminism. However, contemporary Marxists have argued that intersectionality theory is limited as a guide to political practice because contributions from this perspective tend to remain at the level of description. Judith Orr writes that intersectionality “may be a useful concept to break from the idea that all women are a single category with the same experiences and needs, but it remains useful only at the level of description and recognition” (Orr 2015: 150). This descriptive tendency within intersectionality

theory is perhaps best exemplified in Crenshaw's metaphor for the operation of the multiple forms of oppression:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that “but for” the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch. (Crenshaw 1989: 151)

Leaving to one side the problematic concept of “those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way,” a phrase that calls out for an engagement with Marx's theory of alienation, these lines offer a plausible description of reality. However, the conception of society implied within them is essentially a form of critical liberalism—society is conceived as a collection of interacting monads, albeit with a richer conception of individuality than is typical of the abstract egoistic individuals of classical liberal theory (McNally 2017: 97–99). More to the point, the strategic implications of this approach are far from clear. For while intersectionality theory points to the potential for unity between overlapping groups, it remains rooted in the kind of identity politics that in the 1980s all too often declined into divisive forms of “oppression-trumping” (Callinicos 1995: 198). More specifically, the kind of anti-oppressive strategies that are related to intersectionality theory tend to be individualised and moralistic (Watkins 2018: 71). Indeed, it is difficult to see what appeal might be made to the inhabitants of Crenshaw's metaphorical upper room beyond some sort of Kantian imperative to act against their interests and desires. It is for this reason that modern forms of feminism have, according to Jennifer Cotter, tended to shift from politics to moralism. She writes that after rejecting the kind of materialist analysis suggested by Engels, contemporary feminism has replaced “revolutionary praxis” with various forms of “ethical resistance” that “advocates primarily for changes in *behavior* as a means for social transformation” (Cotter 2002).

Cotter's characterisation of some strains of contemporary feminism is in fact typical of theory's broader turn from politics to morality after the cultural

turn.<sup>2</sup> Ironically enough, while this turn to morality was informed by an attempt to move beyond the limitations of Marxism, its social content usually involved a reversal back from Marx's neo-Aristotelian ethics to pre-Marxist moralistic and utopian forms of politics that the young Marx, following Fourier, criticised as "impotence in action" (Marx and Engels 1975: 201).

Despite criticisms of the sort mounted by Cotter, some contemporary Marxists have attempted to integrate Marxism with theories of intersectionality (Bhattacharya 2017). Sharon Smith agrees that intersectionality is a descriptive concept, but suggests that it might be synthesised into a renewed Marxism because it can "be applied to a variety of theories" (Smith 2015; Ferguson and McNally 2013; Brenner 2000). This is a problematic argument not least because intersectionality theory is more than mere description of the social world; it is, as we have suggested above, a description of reality whose theoretical infrastructure is essentially individualistic. To combine this approach with Marxism risks a politically debilitating form of theoretical eclecticism.<sup>3</sup> More to the point, the claim that Marxism requires renewing through incorporation of some form of intersectionality theory betrays a misunderstanding of Marx's method as a form of class reductionism.

In a recent attempt to address Marxism's supposed blindness to questions of oppression David Camfield has called for an "anti-racist, queer, feminist, historical materialism" that aims to combine the best aspects both of intersectionality theory on the one side with Marxism on the other. Through the lens of a critique of the work of Alex Callinicos, Camfield argues that his proposed approach improves on Callinicos's classical Marxist claim that Marxism is able to "explain relations of domination" in terms of "forces and relations of production." Camfield argues that the type of Marxism espoused by Callinicos tends, on the one hand, to "confuse the origins of forms of oppression with its

2. The turn to ethics amounted to a return to Kant. Marx's ethics, by contrast, fills the empty abstractions of Kantian theory with a historically emergent form of humanism constituted through the concrete struggles of the oppressed and exploited against capitalism (Blackledge 2010; 2012: 4–17).
3. This seems to be the case with Susan Ferguson's attempt to synthesise Marxism and intersectionality theory. She concludes that in her reformulated concept of the capitalist totality "there is no compelling reason to prioritise so-called economic or workplace-based struggles in the fight for a better society. Any struggle within the realm of social reproduction—be it anti-racist, feminist, anti-colonial, or be it over education, healthcare, transportation—that promotes human need over capital's interests can chip away at the capitalist social formation" (Ferguson 2016: 57). This argument conflates the claim that Marxists should engage in and support any struggle within the realm of social reproduction—this is in a sense merely to repeat Lenin's famous claim that socialists should act not as mere trade unionists but as the tribunes of the people—with the much more dubious suggestion that all these forms of struggle are equivalent. Marxists prioritise workplace struggles not because they deify the working class but because capital deifies profits and workers have the potential collective power to expropriate them.

operations,” while, on the other hand, treating “forms of oppression as derivative, ultimately passive players in explaining social processes.” So, despite the fact that he accepts modern racism can be understood as emerging to justify slavery at the time of European colonial expansion, he adds the important rider that “once gender and racial oppression exist neither are any less real than class relations, and it is a mistake to think that their operations can simply be explained through class.” And rather than racism merely functioning to blunt class consciousness he insists that it can often better be understood as empowering rather than disempowering white workers (Camfield 2016a, 2016b; Callinicos 1990).

Callinicos’s response to Camfield’s charge that Marxism involves a form of class reductionism is of general significance. He accepts the anti-reductionist point that racism has “an enormous historical reality that explains a great deal about Western capitalist societies.” However, he denies that this truth contradicts the claim “that racism itself needs explanation in terms of the prevailing forces and relations of production.” More specifically, he insists that Camfield’s argument rests in part on a misunderstanding about the role of explanation within Marxist theory (Callinicos 2014b: 132–33). Marx did not seek to reduce forms of domination or oppression to epiphenomena of class relations. Rather, his goal was to integrate these aspects of reality into a whole that is adequate to conceptualising reality in all its complexity (Giminez 2001 makes a similar point). Elsewhere, Callinicos argues that Marx’s method of moving from the abstract to the concrete as outlined in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* involves “the progressive introduction of increasingly complex determinations.” Understood in this way explanation “means something like being placed correctly in the system of concepts that together form the theory of the capitalist mode of production” (Callinicos 2014a: 130–31; cf. Marx 1973: 101; Ilyenkov 2013; Blackledge forthcoming). From the perspective of this method, which was shared by Engels (Hunley 1991: 92; cf. Ollman 2003: 147), a unitary theory of gender as a capitalist form is a prerequisite for the elaboration of a strategy adequate to the task of challenging the kind of *capitalist* power relations highlighted by the #MeToo movement.

This sort of framework is a long way from the image of Marxism found in the work of intersectionality theorists. Patricia Hill Collins argues that “The radical left” shares a parallel failing with white feminism insofar as both groups tend to identify “the oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all others as being of lesser importance.” Thus she dismisses the radical left for supposedly claiming that “If only people of color and women could see their true class interests . . . class solidarity would eliminate racism and sexism” (Collins 2000: 287). But if Callinicos is right, such criticisms of Marxism miss their mark because they misunderstand

Marx and Engels's method of rising from the abstract to the concrete. Marxism aims not to reduce all forms of oppression to epiphenomena of class exploitation, but rather to grasp the reality of contemporary forms of exploitation and oppression as parts of a complex concrete totality. Moreover, the Marxist concept of determination should be understood not as denoting a mechanically causal relationship, but rather as a non-reductionist conception derived from Hegel. Alasdair MacIntyre, whose early interpretation of historical materialism strongly influenced E. P. Thompson's historical writings, argues that

as Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is fundamentally not only not mechanical, it is not even casual. What may be misleading here is Marx's Hegelian vocabulary. Marx certainly talks of the basis 'determining' the superstructure and of a 'correspondence' between them. But the reader of Hegel's *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be understood in terms of the way in which the nature of the concept of a given class, for example, may determine the concept of membership of that class. What the economic basis, the mode of production, does is to provide a framework within which superstructure arises, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationship from which all else grows. (MacIntyre 2008: 55; see also Thompson 1978: 330–31, 358–66, 399–40; Blackledge 2006: 178–91; 2002)

These arguments suggest that Marxist criticisms of privilege and intersectionality theories are aimed neither at dismissing the reality of oppression as detailed by intersectionality theorists and others, nor at reducing the struggles of the oppressed to the status of mere epiphenomena of class relations (cf. Blackledge 2013). Rather, Marxism aims to strengthen these struggles by conceptualising them as a capitalist form that can be related more securely to other struggles within and against capitalism (Choonara and Prasad 2014).

The importance of Engels's *Origin* to this project is that it marked the first Marxist attempt to grasp one aspect of this complex totality—the matrix of class and gender relations—so as to inform a strategy adequate to the challenge of combatting capitalism as a gendered and exploitative system as a whole. If *Origin* is a flawed contribution to this project, its flaws do not stem from a supposed attempt to reduce oppression to exploitation but rather from weaknesses with its conception both of the historical emergence of women's oppression and of women's oppression as a capitalist form.

*Origin* was published against the backdrop of Marx and Engels's ongoing attempts to win and maintain hegemony for their ideas on the European and especially the German left. Lise Vogel claims that Engels's *Origin* acted as a "silent polemic" against the utopian and reformist implications German Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel's recently published and enormously influential *Women and Socialism* (Vogel 2013: 102). The first edition of Bebel's book came out in 1879 and was immediately banned under Bismarck's

anti-socialist laws. The 1883 edition was retitled *Women in the Past, Present and Future* in an unsuccessful attempt to bypass Bismarck's censors. It did however succeed in its main goal of getting his message over to the mass of Germans: it went through fifty editions over the next thirty years (nine by the time of the ending of the anti-socialist laws in 1890) to become the most borrowed book from workers' libraries over this period (Vogel 2013: 102). This was by any measure a great success. However, from Engels's perspective there were important problems with Bebel's text, and Vogel is right to highlight the strange fact that, despite the close relationship between the two men, Engels wrote nothing that we know of (we can't be certain because not all of his correspondence has survived) to highlight these weaknesses.

On the positive side, by insisting on the common class interests of male and female workers Bebel's book marked an important improvement from the perspective of those on the German left who, following Ferdinand Lassalle, insisted that women should be kept out of the factories (Draper 2013: 235–46). However, beyond its critique of contemporary sexism, Bebel's book was fundamentally incoherent. On the one hand its theoretical architecture seemed to disbar women's liberation as a real historical possibility by positing it as a transhistorical fact—"In spite of all changes in form this oppression has remained the same" (Bebel 1988: 7)—while on the other hand it suggested a relatively simple mechanism by which women's liberation might be realised. Bebel suggested that because the social basis for women's oppression lay in the "dependence" of women on men within the family, independence from men would solve the "woman question": "the woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of domination and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot" (Bebel quoted in Vogel 2013: 106).

Engels did not explicitly challenge Bebel's arguments, and Lise Vogel is probably right to assume that he judged that to win the argument against Bebel rather than mount a full-scale attack on his book he would be better served writing an alternative and more powerful analysis both of the historical nature of women's oppression and the socialist strategy for women's liberation. Whatever his reasoning, Engels implicitly countered Bebel's argument by challenging the notion that women's oppression was a universal characteristic of human history by claiming that women had been in a position of rough equality prior to the emergence of agriculture communities; that family structures through which the oppression of women was reproduced had changed over time; and that the modern proletarian family pointed to the possibility of women's liberation through the struggle for socialism.

If the fundamental strength of Engels's book lies in his attempt to theorise the oppression of women as an historical rather than universal fact, it is

nonetheless incredible that his arguments continued to resonate on the left for as long as they did given that they were not based on original research and were written very quickly after reading a relatively narrow range of literature. *Origin* essentially (and explicitly) functions as a popular recasting through the lens of Marx's ethnological notebooks of Lewis Henry Morgan's path-breaking study of the route taken from prehistoric foraging communities to the emergence of civilisation: *Ancient Society* (1877). Engels noted that though Marx had mentioned Morgan's book to him before his death in 1883, they had not discussed it in any detail. Subsequently, he discovered Marx's extensive excerpt notebooks on Morgan—running to around 150 pages in Lawrence Krader's collection *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (1974). After reading these notebooks Engels spent several months trying to lay his hands on a copy of Morgan's hard to find book. Once he acquired a copy he quickly wrote *Origin* between March and May 1884. As it happens speed of production meant he cut corners. However, it is interesting that on his own account he nonetheless managed to “guess” correctly what had been written in the literature he had not read. While carrying out the research for the fourth edition that he should have done for the first, he confided to Marx's daughter Laura that “I had to read the whole literature on the subject (which *entre nous* I had not done when I wrote the book—with a cheek worthy of my younger days) and to my great astonishment I find that I had *guessed* the contents of all these unread books pretty correctly—a good deal better luck than I had deserved” (Engels 2001: 202).

The methodological core of the *Origin* is famously expressed in its opening claim that Morgan had rediscovered the materialist conception of history,

according to [which], the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, of articles of food and clothing, dwellings, and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other. (Engels 1990: 131–32)

More than any other passage, Engels's interlocutors have subjected these lines to critical scrutiny. The reason is simple enough: whereas in *Anti-Dühring* he had defended a method for grasping concrete reality as a complex totality (Engels 1987: 22; Blackledge 2017), this passage seems to suggest a more pluralistic “dual systems” approach: capitalist class exploitation on the one hand and the patriarchal oppression of women on the other as two distinct aspects of reality.

Over the last century there has been a wide ranging discussion of this issue. Amongst German Social Democrats, both Karl Kautsky and Heinrich Cunow criticised Engels's supposed dual systems approach for pointing away from Marxism towards an idealistic conception of historical change (Thönnessen 1973: 38). Socialist feminists, by contrast, have tended to criticise Engels for not giving sufficient weight to reproduction within his dual systems approach. For instance, Jane Humphries welcomed Engels's denaturalisation of marriage and the family but combined praise for his insights with an expression of grave concern about his failure to live up to the potential of the dual systems approach; suggesting that in the "the execution of his analysis" Engels tends to exclude reproduction from his account of society's economic base. Consequently, despite the many insights of his analysis, for him "feminist issues become secondary, and the contradiction between men and women subservient to that between capital and labour" (Humphries 1987: 11). Similarly, Frigga Haug has recently suggested that though the dual systems approach laid the basis for a theory of gender, in practice Engels undermined this potentiality by prioritising the production of the means of existence over the production of human beings (Haug 2015: 48). Wally Seccombe, by contrast, lays the blame for the neglect of the "production of human beings" squarely at the feet of twentieth-century Marxists who oversimplified Engels's more nuanced model of the relationship between production and reproduction (Seccombe 1992: 256). Juliet Mitchell's response to this supposed analytical weakness was to stress that "the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy" should be understood as "two autonomous areas" (Mitchell 1974: 412). In another classic critique of Engels's thesis, Heidi Hartmann defended a dual systems model as an essential means of making sense of the fact that, despite his claim that socialism would guarantee women's liberation, history had shown that "a society could undergo transition from capitalism to socialism . . . and remain patriarchal" (Hartman 1981: 4–5; 17). Hartmann substantiated this claim by reference to the experience of post-revolutionary China. This point was also raised by Mary Evans, for whom, "the evidence of socialist states suggests that the entry of women into social production without an accompanying change in the ideology of gender and the social organisation of the sexual division of labour institutionalises the double shift that women work." She highlights the fact that "the exclusion of women from public power is as marked a feature of state socialism as it is of capitalism" (Evans 1987: 82–83). Similar points were made by Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone who extended aspects of Engels's declared method to subvert his conclusions: the experience of the communist states had shown that patriarchy rather than class exploitation was the fundamental division within modern society (Fire-

stone 1970: 169; Barrett and McIntosh 1982: 18–19; Barrett 2014: 10–12; German 1998: 63).

Unfortunately, while the dual systems approach is able to make sense of the continuation of women's oppression under (supposedly) communist regimes, it does so at a great cost. Methodological pluralism tends to the kind of theoretical eclecticism that opens a space for "common-sense" ahistorical conceptions of social relations (Ilyenkov 2013). Martha Gimenez points out that Firestone's and Millett's supposed improvements on Engels actually mark a retreat from his insights about the historical character of sexual and marriage relations. Their alternative conception of patriarchy effectively amounts to a warmed-over version of the kind of ahistorical method that Marx and Engels had demolished in *The German Ideology*: "early feminist rejection of Marx's "economic determinism" led to the production of ahistorical theories of patriarchy" (Gimenez 2005).

Lise Vogel has criticised Engels for opening the door to ahistorical arguments of this sort. She claims that the duality between production and reproduction in his analysis reflects his failure to transcend the weakest aspects of *The German Ideology*: "while Engels underscores the simultaneous emergence of sex- and class-conflict, he never achieves a clear picture of their connection" (Vogel 2013: 137). Vogel suggests that, as in *The German Ideology*, *Origin* reproduces "a relatively sharp distinction between natural and social phenomena." This in turn led Engels to conceive women's oppression "virtually autonomously" from social production (Vogel 2013: 94, 136). If this approach paved the way to Millett's and Firestone's subversion of his political conclusions, Vogel recognises that at its best Engels's analysis jars against the theoretical weaknesses of his system. For instance, at those points in the text where he argues that women's liberation will be realised through a combination of women's full participation in public production, the socialisation of domestic labour and the decoupling of the family from its role as an economic unit (Vogel 2013: 137). So whereas Engels's feminist critics have argued that his analysis suffers from a failure to rise to the level of sophistication of his dual systems theory, Vogel suggests that his theoretical precepts are the weakest aspect of his work and what is needed is a unitary Marxist account of women's oppression as a specifically capitalist form. In particular she claims that Engels failed adequately to conceptualise women's oppression in relation to Marx's analysis of the reproduction of labour power in *Capital*.

Though Vogel's criticisms of Engels are important, she subsequently seems to have accepted that she had overstated her case. In a later essay she agreed with Martha Gimenez that despite Engels's nominal acceptance of the equivalence between production and reproduction, "throughout the *Origin*, as elsewhere, Engels describes the developments in production as fundamen-

tally causal” (Vogel 1996: 144; Gimenez 1987: 39). This is closer to the truth (though Engels did not hold to a simple causal model of historical change)—and it undermines his critics’ suggestion that his book failed to rise to the level of its preface. Indeed, whatever might be inferred from the preface about the existence of two distinct modes of production, the substance of *Origin* is, as many dual systems theorists have suggested, much less ambiguous: the production of the means of existence is seen to increasingly predominate over the production of human beings as the productivity of labour increases through history. Consequently, the crux of Engels’s argument is much more monist than pluralist interpretations of the preface to his book would suggest.

In fact, as Chris Harman and Lindsey German have pointed out, the preface is much less vague than Engels’s critics have claimed (Harman 2010: 35–36; German 1998: 65–66). Within the same paragraph that he makes his claim about two systems he immediately insists on the tendency for the production of the means of existence to predominate over the production of life:

The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live are determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour, on the one hand, and of the family, on the other. The less labour is developed and the more limited the volume of its products and, therefore, the wealth of society, the more predominantly the social order appears to be dominated by ties of kinship. However, within this structure of society based on ties of kinship, the productivity of labour develops more and more; with it, private property and exchange, differences in wealth, the possibility of utilising the labour power of others, and thereby the basis of class antagonisms: new social elements, which strive in the course of generations to adapt the old structure of society to the new conditions, until, finally, incompatibility of the two leads to a complete transformation. The old society, based on ties of kinship, bursts asunder with the collision of the newly developed social classes; in its place a new society appears, constituted in a state, the lower units of which are no longer groups based on ties of kinship but territorial groups, a society in which the family system is entirely dominated by the property system, and in which the class antagonisms and class struggle, which make up the content of all hitherto *written* history now freely unfold. (Engels 1990: 132)

Engels did not err in his execution of a dual systems approach because he did not hold one. He argued that changes in family structure were determined by the changing nature of production. Specifically, the turn to agriculture underpinned the emergence of private property which in turn came into conflict with and eventually led to the overthrow of pre-existing egalitarian family structures.

Engels’s substantive account of the emergence of private property, states and women’s oppression drew on Morgan’s periodisation of human history into three main epochs—savagery (foraging), barbarism (agriculture) and civilisation (urban). Engels explained the rise of classes, the state and sexual

oppression within the context of the change in the mode of production from foraging through horticulture and on to agricultural and urban societies. He argued that it was only at the point in history when the productivity of labour exceeded that necessary for its own "maintenance" that the exploitation of man by man, and the existence of social classes, became a possibility (Engels 1990: 163). Developing his and Marx's discussion of the division of labour in *The German Ideology*, he argued that the rough early egalitarian division of labour within the family between (male) hunters and (female) gatherers was slowly transformed into a power relationship as the move to pastoralism dramatically increased the status of men without changing the division of labour within the family: the position of women deteriorated relative to the position of the men in a context where woman's domestic position brought less and less wealth into the household relative to the man's new wealth in livestock (Engels 1990: 165). Furthermore, with the increased productivity of labour and the existence of surplus product, warfare became endemic as people stole both livestock and other people to use as slaves. Wars over the control of social surplus in turn begat warriors; and this process informed the emergence of a new division of labour: first men and women could for the first time become the spoils of war, creating a new class of unfree labour; while a second division arose between more and less powerful men within the victorious groups. Engels argued, "from the first great social division of labour arose the first great cleavage of society into two classes: masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited" (Engels 1990: 261). It was at this point in history that the concept of private property emerged to delineate the control by particular individuals over parts of the social surplus. Once private property emerged, the problem of how to reproduce it over generations became a concrete concern. Whereas, previously, descent had been measured through the mother, now fathers, requiring a mechanism to pass on property to children, demanded sole sexual access to specific women. In this context, the family developed not as a realm of domestic bliss "which forms the ideal of the present day philistine," but as a property right bestowed upon the man. So, in contrast to the reproductive structure of savage and barbarian groups, the emergence of civilisation marked "the overthrow of mother right," which was itself "the world historical defeat of the female sex" (Engels 1990: 165). After a protracted process, the new inequalities and divisions were solidified, and with the birth of civilisation there emerged "a class which no longer concerns itself with production" (Engels 1990: 265). However, as class exploitation and sexual oppression emerged through history, so too did the struggles against them. In this context, the state grew as a structure needed to stabilise society in the interests of the new ruling class (Engels 1990: 269, 271).

By contrast with his powerful critique of the state, Engels praised the Iroquois for their happy existence without a state: “and a wonderful constitution it is, this gentle constitution, in all its childlike simplicity! No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, or lawsuits—and everything takes its orderly course” (Engels 1990: 202). Eleanor Burke Leacock has argued that “the Iroquois confederacy represents the highest stage of political organisation under the gentile system” (Leacock 1981: 47). It was only as society evolved beyond this level of complexity that state like formations grew. As late as 1946, V. Gordon Childe, amongst the most influential archaeologists of the twentieth century, could write that “the sevenfold division adumbrated by Lewis H. Morgan and refined by Friedrich Engels, with his more comprehensive knowledge of European archaeology, is still unsurpassed” (Childe 2004: 77). While the detail of the various ways in which class divisions and states evolved have long since moved beyond this account—indeed Childe moved to embrace a more multilineal approach by the 1950s—Patterson argues that Morgan and Engels made important contributions to our understanding of the past because they highlighted the novelty both of social classes and states: “the appearance of social-class structures is always linked to the institutions, practices and legal codes of the state, which simultaneously represents the interests of the dominant class” (Patterson 2009: 112; Sacks 1982: 41). The emergence of states and classes alongside women’s oppression, marked a profound transformation in human history; albeit, as Ian Hodder points out in his discussion of the archaeological evidence at Çatalhöyük, that this qualitative change was underpinned by a gradual and cumulative process of quantitative changes (Hodder 2006: 17–18, 214). And despite the massive strides taken within archaeology and anthropology since Engels’s death, Vincente Lull and Rafael Micó have recently commented on the similarities between his account of the emergence of the state and modern processual archaeological models (Lull and Micó 2011: 227).

Eleanor Burke Leacock seems therefore to have been right to argue that “despite its shortcomings, [Engels’s book] is still a masterful and profound theoretical synthesis” (Leacock 1981: 25). If the key insights of the book include his analysis of the historical novelty both of women’s oppression within the family and of the state as a power over society, amongst its shortcomings one that has commanded more attention than it should have is his claim that the emergence of civilisation marked “the overthrow of mother right.” Numerous commentators have taken this to imply that Engels conflated matrilineal and matrilocal societies with matriarchal societies. But this is simply not the case. He justified his use of the term “mother right” much more pragmatically: “I retain this term for the sake of brevity. It is, however, an unhappy choice, for at this stage of society, there is as yet no such thing as right in the legal

sense" (Engels 1990: 152). He was, however, on weaker ground when he followed Morgan in assuming that certain forms of familial classifications were fossilised remains of earlier forms of group marriage and promiscuity, and he was probably wrong about the importance of lineages in pre-class societies— foraging groups were much too "loose and flexible" to be considered either patrilineal or matrilineal (Harman 1994: 13–14, 111). Moreover, the paucity of evidence led him into the realm of speculation as regards the mechanisms by which family structures changed and states arose. As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, while she accepted that *Origin* illuminated the historical nature of private property, the family and the state, Engels failed to elucidate the concrete mechanism by which this change was realised (de Beauvoir 1972: 86–87; Trat 1998: 94; Foreman 1977: 25–29).

Nonetheless, despite numerous relatively minor errors and lacunae, Chris Harman argues that Engels's "overall picture of the rise of class society is basically correct" as is his claim that "women were not subordinated to men until the rise of classes, that 'the first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male'" (Harman 1994: 113; Harman 1994: 129; Woolfson 1982; cf. Engels 1990: 173; Harman 2008: 3–31; Feeley 2015). Engels may not have located the mechanism by which this change came about, but that this revolutionary change occurred at this moment and that it entailed women's oppression is not a universal characteristic of human society is of the first importance to any strategy aiming at women's liberation.

However, an adequate political challenge to the status quo requires more than an awareness that existing social relations are not natural; it is also essential to point to the tendencies immanent to the system which point beyond it. This aspect of Engels's analysis in *Origin* is less successful. Specifically, his discussion of the proletarian family is very problematic.

His discussion of the modern working-class family is not, though, without significant insight. If his historical account of changing family forms challenged simplistic accounts of the universality of patriarchy, Michèle Barrett has suggested that "Engels's most important achievement was his perception of materially different relations between the sexes for members of different social classes" (Barrett 2014: 48). Despite formal similarities in family structures across social classes in the nineteenth century, Engels illuminated the very real substantive differences between bourgeois and proletarian families. He was scathing in his criticisms of the bourgeois family—he described it as institutionalised prostitution. Beneath the platitudes about love, this form of monogamy was a cynical economic contract aimed at the reproduction of private property over the generations. Monogamy in this sense was an "economic

unit,” and a hypocritical one at that—while it was assumed that men would stray, the penalties for women who did so were severe. So the bourgeois family carried on a tradition of women’s oppression going back to the emergence of private property.

The proletarian family, by contrast, had a very different social content. With no property there was “no incentive . . . [and] no means . . . to make this male supremacy effective” within the working-class family. Similarly, the power of the male “breadwinner” was diminishing in direct relation to the success of large-scale industry in pulling women into the labour force. Moreover, because proletarians had little or no access to the law, legal prescriptions pertaining to the relations between the sexes had very little impact on their lives. Consequently, the conditions for bourgeois monogamy did not exist within the proletariat: the working-class family “is therefore no longer monogamous in the strict sense, even where there is passionate love and firmest loyalty on both sides.” Or rather the proletarian marriage was becoming “monogamous in the etymological sense of the word, but not at all in its historical sense” (Engels 1990: 179). For Engels, therefore, as the relations that underpinned the oppressive essence of historical monogamy faded, the conditions were emerging for the transformation of the social content of monogamy into what he called “individual sex love” (Engels 1990: 183)—a condition very different to the ruling-class monogamy which, at its blissful best amounted to “a conjugal partnership of leaden boredom” (Engels 1990: 178). He thus imagined non-oppressive and liberated sexual relations as potentially realising the ideal of monogamy against its reality; and what is more he suggested that this ideal was actually emerging within the working class as he wrote.

Clearly, there is something to this account of the proletarian family: sexual relations are different when not primarily mediated by concerns about reproducing private property. Nonetheless, as Barrett points out, Engels’s sketch of the working-class family is far too good to be true (Barrett 2014: 49). The problem, however, is not that Engels was unaware of the real patterns of oppression within modern families. In a brilliant historical sketch he suggested that:

In the old communistic household, which embraced numerous couples and their children, the administration of the household, entrusted to the women, was just as much a public, a socially necessary industry as the procurement of food by the men. This situation changed with the patriarchal family, and even more with the monogamian individual family. The administration of the household lost its public character. It was no longer the concern of society. It became a *private service*. The wife became the first domestic servant, pushed out of participation in social production. Only the large-scale industry of our time has again thrown open to her—and only to the proletarian woman at that—the avenue to social production; but in such a way that, if she fulfils her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and cannot earn anything; and if

she wishes to take part in public industry and earn her living independently, she is not in a position to fulfil her family duties. (Engels 1990: 181)

More specifically, he insisted that “the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife,” and “within the family . . . at least in the possessing classes . . . he is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat” (Engels 1990: 181). Though this latter line became a favourite slogan of the German socialist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, it cannot stand up to critical scrutiny as a scientific statement about the relationship between men and women in the family. Moreover, it appears innocent both of the mediated nature of the domestic relationship for bourgeois women—for whom cooks, nannies, cleaners and the like ensure a life that is a long way from domestic slavery—and of the harshness of conditions experienced by proletarian women: most of whom have little choice but to endure both domestic slavery and wage slavery.

And because capitalism requires both these roles be met, it is characterised by a contradiction between the demands of economic growth which draws increasing numbers of women into the labour force on the one hand and an ideology which tells women that their proper place is in the home on the other. One consequence of this situation is that the potential for women to participate in the collective strength of the working class is mediated by an ideology of gender roles within the family. If this ideology punctures the simple optimism of Engels's analysis of the consequences of women's increased participation in industry, the fact that working-class women suffered the double burden of domestic and wage slavery illuminates deeper limitations with his argument. With or without private property, working-class families are characterised by oppressive relations that can be, if anything, worse than those experienced by the bourgeoisie. In fact, Engels too quickly jumps from a discussion of the proletarian family under capitalism to an overview of its position after a revolution had transformed the means of production from private to social property (Engels 1990: 182ff.). If this movement underpins his speculative discussion of the sublation of monogamy into “individual sex love,” it also meant that he bypassed a proper analysis of the relationship between the proletarian family and capital accumulation.

Vogel points out that because Engels failed to address this issue, he “misses the significance of the working class household as an essential social unit, not for the holding of property but for the reproduction of the working class itself.” He also “overlooks the ways in which a material basis for male supremacy is constituted within the proletarian household. And . . . vastly underestimates the variety of ideological and psychological factors that provide a continuing foundation for male supremacy in the working class family” (Vogel 2013: 156).

It is certainly true that Engels is at his weakest when discussing the relationship of the modern family to capitalism; and this is perhaps not coincidental given the weaknesses with his conception of the capitalist value form which informed his mistaken transposition of capitalist social relations back to the earliest forms of commodity exchange (Weeks 1981).

The relationship between the modern family and the capital accumulation process is perhaps best illuminated through the forces that brought the working-class family back from the brink of collapse in the mid-nineteenth century. In a period when industrial capitalism sucked women and children into the labour process, one in four children in Manchester in the 1860s did not live to see their first birthday, and the high death rate amongst children meant that life expectancy for men in some areas of Salford in the 1870s was as low as seventeen years. If this situation reflected the short-term needs of individual capitalists, the longer term requirements of the capitalist class as a whole demanded some mechanism to mediate this barbarism so as to allow for the reproduction of the labour force. This is what Marx called “the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production.” Unfortunately, Marx was terse in the extreme as to the detail of the social reproduction process: “The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation” (Marx 1976: 716, 718; cf. Foster and Clark 2018).

Lindsey German argues that Labour legislation in mid-Victorian Britain effectively addressed this issue by reconstituting the working class family in light of the demands of capital accumulation. These labour laws ensured a steady stream of new workers through a novel structure—the modern nuclear family—that was justified by a nominally natural but in fact modern ideology in which men were accounted breadwinners, while women were housewives whose role it was to bring up the next generation of workers who in their turn were reimagined as “children” (German 1998: 15–42).

Vogel’s book amounts to the most powerful attempt to conceptualise the relationship between the modern working-class family and the capital accumulation process through Marx’s concept of the social reproduction of labour power. She suggests there are three aspects to this process. First, the daily reproduction costs of the direct producers who need food, sleep, clothing, shelter etc. Second, the cost of reproducing non-productive members of the working class—the young, old, sick etc. Third, the cost of reproducing the next generation of wage labourers (Vogel 2013: 188). This process implies an inclusive definition of the working class. So by contrast with the those who define the working class narrowly to include only those involved in wage labour, Vogel insists that, in her broader model, “the working class will be viewed as consisting of a society’s past, present, and potential wage-labour force, together

with all those whose maintenance depends on the wage but who do not or cannot themselves enter wage-labour" (Vogel 2013: 166). The capitalist form of women's oppression, she argues, has its roots in this process: "It is the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the childbearing period, and not the sex-division of labour in itself, that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class-society" (Vogel 2013: 153). In so relating the modern family to the process of capital accumulation Vogel overcame the fundamental weakness of Engels's *Origin* (Vogel 2013: 136; Harman 2010: 24). It is not that Engels had not registered aspects of this reality, but rather that he failed to integrate these insights into his broader analysis of the oppression of working-class women under capitalism.

While Vogel is right to claim that because Engel's account of the working-class family does not take account of its position within broader capitalist social relations it fails adequately to underpin a revolutionary solution to women's oppression as an integral part of the struggle for socialism, her own belief that China, Cuba, the Soviet Union and Albania were socialist states within which similar patterns of women's oppression were reproduced to those found in the West undermines her own plea for a unitary theory of women's oppression as an aspect of capitalist social relations (Vogel 2013: 180–81). Surely, if socialism reproduced essentially the same form of women's oppression as exists under capitalism—and Vogel effectively naturalised the persistence of gender inequalities in Communist states by explaining them as a consequence of "real differences between [men and women], particularly in the area of child bearing"—Firestone and Millett are right to view women's oppression as a distinct and more fundamental division than that between social classes. In fact, Vogel's comments on women's experience of Stalinism fails to match the clarity of Millett's account of the same. For whereas Millett points to the fact that the Stalinist bureaucracy actively chose to push the cost of social reproduction onto women in the family—"Having declined to fulfil its promise of crèches and collective housekeeping, and in view of its experience without them, as well as in view of the priority it put upon industrial projects, particularly armaments, Stalin's Russia preferred to bolster the family to perform the functions the state had promised but did not choose to afford"—Vogel suggests that the Stalinists were merely "unable . . . to confront the problems of domestic labour and women's subordination in a systematic way" (Millett 2000: 174; Vogel 2013: 180). For her part, Heather Brown effectively accepts the logic of Millett's interpretation of the Soviet history. The experience of Russian "Communism," she argues, suggests, contra Engels, that "Patriarchy can exist without private property" (Brown 2013: 54).

The problem with Vogel's claim is not merely that it tends to deny the agency of the Stalinist bureaucracy, more importantly it obscures the fact that

the Stalinist states were systematic in their approach to the “woman question”—systematically reactionary. And, as Leon Trotsky perceptively suggested in the 1930s, “the consecutive changes in the approach to the problem of the family in the Soviet Union best of all characterize the actual nature of Soviet society and the evolution of its ruling stratum” (Trotsky 1972: 145). Chanie Rosenberg details the transformations from the early progressive attempts by the Russian revolutionaries to socialise childcare and other family responsibilities to Stalin’s counter-revolutionary decree of 1936, “In defence of Mother and Child,” which “reversed all the gains of the revolution in respect of family law and reintroduced Tsarist prejudices and restrictions” including outlawing abortion and putting “divorce beyond the means of workers’ families” (Rosenberg 1989: 94). Herbert Marcuse points to the simple economic rationale for the new laws: in the context of economic and military competition with the West the Stalinist bureaucrats intended to increase economic growth as cheaply as possible (Marcuse 1958 206–07).

If Brown has no illusions about the oppressive nature of Stalin’s nominal “defence of mother and child,” her critical gaze does not seem to extend to the claim that Stalinist Russia was a socialist state. This is odd given her explicit debt to Raya Dunayevskaya (Brown 2013: 8). Dunayevskaya may have been a harsh critic of Engels, but she was much more severe in her criticisms of what she called Soviet “state capitalism.” This concept is of direct relevance to Brown’s comments on Engels, for Dunayevskaya understood more than most that the Marxist conception of private property cannot be reduced either to Western type free market economies or to particular patterns of ownership amongst workers and capitalists: “To Marx, private property is the power to dispose of the labour of others. That is why he is so adamant that to make ‘society’ the owner, but to leave the alienated labour alone, is to create ‘an abstract capitalist’” (Dunayevskaya 1988: 61–62). This, as Dunayevskaya argues, is precisely what had happened in Russia, China and other supposedly “Communist” states in the twentieth century. She argues that beginning with the introduction of the first Five Year Plan in 1928–1929 and culminating in the “bloodletting” associated with the first great Show Trial of 1936 the Soviet Union was transformed into a state capitalist social formation (Dunayevskaya 1988: 215–29; Cliff 1974; Harris 1978). The great strength of Dunayevskaya’s and similar conceptions of Russian state capitalism is that they pierce beneath the surface appearance of Russian “Communism” to illuminate its real essence as a statist variant of capitalism. In these social formations state planning, far from escaping the system of alienation, was subordinated to it.

By conceptualising Soviet Russia, China and the like as state capitalist social formations, Dunayevskaya and others laid the foundations of a reply to Millett’s and Firestone’s arguments about the links between women’s oppres-

sion and socialism. In their analyses of women's oppression, Chris Harman and Lindsey German attempted, in terms very similar to Vogel's, to develop Engels's insights in the direction of social reproduction theory. But against those who suggest that the experience of twentieth-century Communism undermines this project, their analysis of the material roots of women's oppression in modern capitalism was framed against the background of the claim that Russia, China and elsewhere were bureaucratic state capitalist social formations. Harman argued that whereas Millett and Firestone amongst others insisted that the experience of Russia, Cuba, Vietnam and China show that "socialism can coexist with women's oppression . . . those of us who recognise that the rise of Stalinism established state capitalism in Russia, do not need to draw this conclusion at all." Indeed, the experience of the Russian Revolution shows the opposite to be the case: "the revolution carried through a programme of women's liberation never attempted anywhere else—complete liberation of abortion and divorce laws, equal pay, mass provision of communal child care, socialised canteen facilities and so on." Conversely, it was the Stalinist counter-revolution that brought in its train "the re-imposition of the stereotyped family, anti-abortion laws, restrictions on divorce, and so on" (Harman 2010: 48–50; German 1998: 229–31).

By thus conceiving women's oppression in Stalinist Russia as a variant of women's oppression under capitalism, these writers cleared the way for the kind of unitary theory of women's oppression as a capitalist form originally promised in Engels's *Origin*. Their claim that women's oppression is rooted within the modern family conceived as a unit for the privatised reproduction of labour power overcomes the limitations of Engels's account of the modern working-class family in a way that makes more secure his argument that the struggles for women's liberation and for socialism are two sides of the same coin. The analytical power of this way of conceiving the relationship between women's oppression and class exploitation points beyond the descriptive limitations of intersectionality theory without succumbing to the kind of class reductionism feared by so many feminist activists. Moreover, insofar as it does so, it also points beyond the weak (Kantian) moralistic aspects of some contemporary forms of feminism towards the much more powerful neo-Aristotelian ethical humanism characteristic of Marx's work in which politics is conceived as the critical practice which aims to realise human freedom immanent to contemporary struggles, including the contemporary #MeToo movement, against capitalist alienation (Blackledge 2012: 19–43).

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