

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3918>



Reviews

# Marx and the Family Revisited

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Thursday 12 March 2015

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**The re-issuing of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, 30 years after its initial publication, is a chance for socialist feminists to review the legacy of the Marxist tradition in theorizing the secondary status of women. Vogel's study stands out for its thorough research and critical inspection of Marx's and Engels' discussion of women's oppression, and how their views evolved.**

To the original text, the new edition has added an introduction by Susan Ferguson and David McNally and an appendix, "Domestic Labor Revisited," by Vogel. Ferguson and McNally describe Vogel's work as opening up a new area of research built on "the conceptual architecture of Marx's *Capital*," having been "below-the-radar" during the ice age of neoliberalism. (xvii, xxii)

While explaining Marx's concept of labor power as "the hinge" on which the capitalist system revolves, Ferguson and McNally point out that Marx does not pursue a pivotal question: "How is this unique commodity, labor power, produced? Vogel's answer is that it 'is not produced capitalistically.' Rather, it is produced and reproduced in a 'kin-based site,' the 'working class family.'" (xxiv)

Given that this task is carried out primarily within the family by women as an extension of their childbearing and nursing capacities, capital and the state need to be able to regulate women.

Ferguson and McNally tackle a question that Vogel doesn't explain: Why did Marx assume that capitalist development would disintegrate families of the working class? As they point out, the state would find itself forced to intervene to protect the working class precisely because, under conditions of early English factory life, it was not able to reproduce the next generation of laborers.

Legislation was passed starting in 1842 limiting child labor, curtailing hours of work for women and children and restricting women from certain occupations (such as mining, but not domestic service). These had the effects of shoring up the working-class family and reasserting gender differences. (xxx)

The working class campaigned to defend itself through passage of such legislation. Thus the working-class family under capitalism is shaped by struggles between the working class and capital, and within classes as well. For the capitalists, the family provides the main source of labor power, essential to production; for the working class, it is the site that provides lasting emotional bonds "caring, brutal or somewhere in between."

The introduction also reviews some of the theoretical work that has been done by Black feminists, most notably Patricia Hill Collins. Ferguson and McNally discuss the concept of "intersectionality" that Kimberly Crenshaw first developed. They also take note of new work on sexuality and queer identities and conclude by discussing the work of Himani Bannerji.

For Ferguson and McNally, "a central task of historical materialism is to develop a conceptual map of the real in all its complex and contradictory processes of becoming." They see Vogel as making an important contribution to understanding the gendered forms of capitalist social reproduction, but see this mapping as inevitably far from complete. (xl)

## Reviewing Second Wave Socialist Feminism

Before examining Marxist concepts, Lise Vogel reviews several debates by Second Wave socialist feminists as they unfolded from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. These attempted to explain the material basis for women's status in class society and, to some extent, to relate that status to similar and overlapping oppressions. Some of their theorizing borrowed from concepts raised by Marxists, by radical feminists and Black feminists, and was certainly influenced by Simone De Beauvoir.

Beginning with Juliet Mitchell, Second Wave theorists commented on what they viewed as the "economism" (economic reductionism) of the early Marxists. At the same time, they appreciated the historical materialism of the Marxist tradition and probed for a more compelling analysis of women's status, particularly under capitalism.

These thinkers all rejected the notion that women's growing participation in paid work would successfully undermine women's oppression. Women's responsibilities for unpaid domestic work within the family "whether working outside the home or not" are obviously a central building block in their theorization. Is domestic labor a holdover from a previous mode of production? Do women form a class? Do those women married to men of the corporate elite share, at any level, this secondary status?

Isn't women's work within the household as "productive" as paid work? How do biological, psychological and ideological factors impact women's lives? How can women be seen as actors in reproducing or rejecting their secondary status? What roles do working-class men play in women's oppression?

The first two chapters of Vogel's book review these debates, focusing most specifically on the "wages for housework" demand and on "dual systems" theory "the former primarily concerned with women's unpaid responsibilities under capitalism, the latter an attempt to explain whether class and gender are separate or interlocking systems.

Before turning to the writings of the earlier Marxists, Vogel outlines what she believes must be the components for the unitary approach she seek. It must start from a firm commitment to the liberation of women and real social equality for all; it must analyze women's current status and study its history; it must theorize on the basis of the evidence, and suggest a program and strategy to end women's oppression. (38-39)

Vogel's building blocks ultimately fuse production and reproduction into a single conception of social reproduction that all societies require. When discussing reproduction, she means not only sustenance that allows the worker to continue working, but also caring for those in the household too old to be part of the work force as well as those who will be future workers.

Vogel sharply distinguishes between working-class families, which function to produce a new generation of workers, and families of the ruling class whose primary task, as noted in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), is to transfer property to their children. She observes that the family is the most common way that the next generation of the working class is produced, but mentions other possibilities including slavery, recruitment from rural areas, immigration, or even raising children in orphanages.

She remarks that the family form must have particular advantages as it is the most dominant, but does not investigate this form as it developed under capital. She is investigating theory, not history. As she points out in the appendix:

"(T)heory is necessarily abstract as well as severely constrained in its implications. It can point to key elements and

tendencies but it cannot provide richly textured accounts of social life. Even less does it directly explain events, suggest strategies, or evaluate the prospects for political action." (186)

While this seems to contradict the author's criteria for components of a unitary approach, Vogel sees theory:

"...as a sort of lens. By itself, the lens tells us little about the specifics of a particular society at a particular moment. It is only by using the lens that observers can evaluate such specifics and strategies for the future. Compared to theorizing "the lens" these tasks of empirical investigation and political analysis constitute intellectual work of a different and, I would argue, more challenging sort." (186-7)

Elements of Marx's Theory

In examining Marx's writings, Vogel notes his earliest statement on the relations between men and women is abstract, rooted in the reality of private property. Women are "the other," objects of trade.

Within a year he draws the conclusion that "the change in a historical epoch can always be determined by women's progress toward freedom, because here, in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation." (Quoted on page 44) Marx contrasts this reality with the hypocrisy of contemporary bourgeois society.

Engels, co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*, first examined women's social position in his *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). Engels begins by focusing on the actual experience of industrial and agricultural women workers, insisting that their low wages, long work day and horrendous working conditions are not the result of technological innovation but rather arise out of capital's drive for profit.

He details the effects on women: high rates of miscarriage, difficulty in childbearing and subsequent rearing of children, prostitution and men's brutality toward women. Noting that "family life for the worker is almost impossible under the existing social system," he also remarks that when the woman is employed but her husband is not, the "normal" division of labor within the household is up-ended. But if having the woman as the breadwinner is unnatural, Engels poses the question: Isn't the rule of the husband also unnatural? He concludes that it must be.

Vogel draws three important theoretical contributions from this early Engels.

1. "The family must be conceptualized in terms of specific modes of production and specific classes." (49)
2. Certain assumptions are implicit within the wage structure. Even when competition among workers is fierce, wages must be high enough for the worker on a given job to continue working. Vogel notes that in *Conditions* "Engels has sketched the outlines of a theory of the relationship between wages and the working-class family: the level of wages is as much a social as a physical issue; wages cover the reproduction of the working class by supporting households, not individuals; capitalists can therefore force wages down by drawing more household-members into wage labour; such a depreciation of the value of an individual's work may require a significant alteration in what Engels terms "the standard of living and the level of culture of the workers.'" (my emphasis, 50)
3. Engels observes that there is a relationship between the size of the working class and the degree of capitalist development. Industry always needs a reserve of unemployed workers who can compete for jobs in a tight market and be added as the market expands. If necessary, additional labor can be found in more rural districts or imported from another country.

## The Family Form

Vogel notes some ambiguity in the early Marxist writings about the existence and extent of a working-class family. She sees Marx and Engels as mistaken in denying its existence. However, I have always assumed that what they saw in the 1840s was a fairly accurate picture: the English working-class family developed after passage of a 10-hour work day and protective legislation "as Ferguson and McNally's introduction outlines. Insofar as this early working class had households, they arose from peasant families.

Vogel does identify Marx's view of the peasant family as hierarchical: "in private property of every type the slavery of the members of the family is at least implicit since they are made use of and exploited by the head of the family." (Marx, quoted 64)

She notes that Marx sees the peasant family's division of labor by sex and age as "natural" and questions that assumption. What is "natural," Vogel notes, is that women bear children and that their milk is necessary to sustain children during infancy.

Marx and Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*, accuse the bourgeoisie of attempting to transform what are social forms that spring from a specific mode of production and form of property into "eternal laws of nature." They ask:

"On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution." (CM quoted 67-68)

In the *Manifesto* they conclude that "The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course" when private property and inheritance rights are abolished; they plead guilty to "wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents," replacing home education with one that is free and publicly available. Women will no longer be the property of men, in the form of "prostitution both public and private" (within the family).

## Women in Paid Work

Unlike many other socialists of their day, Marx and Engels supported women's right to paid work outside the home. They supported passage of protective legislation for both women and children and, as Vogel explains, saw that "the drawing of women and children out of social isolation and patriarchal oppression in the peasant family to "cooperate in the great work of social production [is] a progressive, sound and legitimate tendency.'" (74)

Vogel points to the importance of Marx's understanding of how the worker can sell one's labor power (a unit of time) to the individual capitalist, who can then produce a profit on the basis of this exchange. Marx divides the work day into two portions: the amount of time it takes the worker to produce value equal to one's wage "necessary labor time" and the rest of the day, when the worker continues to produce, but the value goes to the capitalist.

By this means the capitalist is able to deprive the worker of the full measure of the value produced. This is the source of exploitation.

Payment of the wage, like all other market exchanges, is determined by the socially necessary labor required for the worker to continue at one's job. But Marx points out that the wage is elastic and depends on a social assumption

about "a traditional standard of life. It is not mere physical life, but it is the satisfaction of certain wants springing from the social conditions in which people are placed and reared up."

Thus the wage can grow or contract depending on the level of competition, on capital's ability to deskill, on workers' capacity to force the employer to raise wages and improve benefits. The price of labor power doesn't usually coincide with its value, but fluctuates around it; Vogel notes it can fall "substantially below its value, to the point that sectors of existing labor-power are not renewed in the next generation." (69)

The wage can buy commodities the worker needs, but generally speaking unpaid domestic labor must be employed to turn them into meals that can be eaten, clothes that are washed and repaired, homes that are maintained.

Vogel highlights three key concepts that Marx takes up in his discussion about wages in *Capital*: individual consumption (the processes by which the laborer consumes in order to live), the value of labor power, and the industrial-reserve army. She cites these three as providing the basis on which to construct "a theory of the relationship of women and the family to social reproduction in general and the capitalist mode of production in particular." (73)

## Marxism After Marx

After Marx's death in 1883, Engels attempted to complete work Marx had started. But both his work on subsequent volumes of *Capital* and his writing *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) are still being criticized 130 years later.

Praising Engels for a restatement of Marx's original ideas on women, the family and the reproduction of the working class in *Anti-Duhring* (1878) and *Origin*, Vogel ends her list by noting that Engels locates family forms in social relations. If these relationships change, the family will change. His call for "the transformation of private domestic work into a public industry" marks "the first formulation within the classical-Marxist tradition of a position later to become a central tenet of socialist strategy." As she also notes, this had long been a concern of utopian thinkers. (78)

Engels produced *Origin* from Marx's notes after reading *Ancient Society* by Edward Morgan, an American considered the father of anthropology. Vogel remarks that "despite its many factual and interpretive errors," *Ancient Society* attempted to describe social institutions in evolutionary terms and thus set a baseline for all subsequent research on early human societies.

One of Morgan's premises is that gender equality once existed, but had been overthrown with the rise of social surplus privately held. That is, the patriarchal family developed primarily as an institution to transmit property along the male line to the next generation. Both Marx in his notebooks and Engels in *Origins* reorganized Morgan's structure, and therefore refocused the discussion on the evolution of the family.

Following the work of Morgan and Johann Jakob Bachofen, Engels assumed that "mother right" operated in primitive societies. The "natural" division of labor placed women in charge of the communal household, with descent following the female line. As productivity grew, especially with the development of agriculture and the raising of animals, men overthrew that social order and imposed a patrilineal clan system.

Engels characterized this change as "the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the

home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children." (Quoted 87)

Engels sees the development of classes taking place at the same time and in the same space as the struggle between male and female.

Looking at marriage under capitalism, Engels notes that the rising bourgeoisie uses the institution for inheritance. But workers have no property, and with the increasing employment of women, male supremacy has no basis to survive "except, perhaps, for something of the brutality toward women that has spread since the introduction of monogamy." (Quoted 88)

Vogel outlines the problem with this assumption: Working-class households are an essential social unit for the reproduction of the working class and provide the material, ideological and psychological basis for male supremacy within the working class.

According to Vogel, Engels emphasizes the importance of women's democratic rights but seems to put off, until after the revolution, the socialization processes necessary to transform the family and liberate women. Because "he only partially transforms Morgan's crude materialism," Vogel argues, "The Origin is marred throughout by Engels' failure to base the discussion on an adequate exposition of Marx's theory of social development," and by "a generally utopian critique of property and view of the socialist future."

In Vogel's judgment, Origin "constituted a defective text whose ambiguous theoretical and political formulations nevertheless became an integral part of the socialist legacy." (96)

Although Vogel finds Origin a step back from Marx's analysis, she points out that Engels undoubtedly wrote as it an alternative to August Bebel's *Women Under Socialism* (1879), which went through 25 editions by 1895.

Sketching the situation of women in the past, the present and the future, Bebel concentrated on indicting capitalism's subordination of women and contrasting that with a future socialism in which there would be equality and a socialization of domestic labor. Most importantly, Bebel challenged the notion that there was natural division of labor by gender.

Vogel finds *Women Under Socialism* passionately argued but theoretically weak. Socialism is seen as a redistribution of goods and services, rather than a reorganization of social relations and production. However it did speak to men and women who saw their world as unjust and were willing to fight for a better one.

She quotes Otilie Baader, an older working-class woman who became an activist in the German Social Democratic Party after reading the book:

"I read it nights through. It was my own fate and that of thousands of my sisters. Neither in the family nor in public life had I ever heard of all the pain the woman must endure. One ignored her life. Bebel's book courageously broke with the old secretiveness....I read the book not once but ten times. Because everything was so new, it took considerable effort to come to grips with Bebel's views. I had to break with so many things that I had previously regarded as correct." (101)

## Problems of Practice

In what I found her least convincing chapters, Vogel discusses socialist feminist practice in the Second International. She sees European socialist parties moving from the 1870s toward a reformism that led them to support their respective imperialist governments in World War I.

I was disappointed by the lack of information about the social democracy and their energetic support of women. On the other hand, I felt Vogel succinctly pinpointed Lenin's understanding about the centrality of democratic rights for the oppressed, and consequently for women's rights.

Lenin saw capitalism as a system which "combines formal equality with economic and, consequently, social inequality." (Quoted, 124) Therefore revolutionaries must support democratic struggles because even limited advances provide better conditions for the entire population. Secondly, in the course of struggle people will see that the source of the problem is capitalism. Vogel sees Lenin's work on democratic rights as extending earlier socialist analysis and distinguishing revolutionary from reformist strategies.

She also cites as refreshingly positive Lenin's comments after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Changing the laws wasn't enough; it was merely clearing the ground for the construction of a new order. In 1919 he wrote that despite "all the law emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery." (125)

For the Bolsheviks, self-emancipation was key to carrying out the tasks of socializing childcare and housework, but Lenin also felt that educating men to overcome their own backwardness was essential in order to "root out the old slave-owner's point of view, both in the Party and among the masses." (Lenin quoted 125, 128)

In summarizing the classical Marxist analysis of women's oppression and how it can be ended, Vogel sees only "limited theoretical guidance." She feels it is marked by inconsistencies and omissions, vacillating between liberal notions of rights, crude materialism and utopian thinking. In fact she sees two differing theories suggested within this jumble "âEuros" a dual systems approach and a social reproduction perspective.

She also believes that those socialists who tend to focus on women's right to love and to be sexual beings have less to offer than those, like Clara Zetkin, who are more theoretical and therefore less likely to veer toward reformism.

## Putting Theory Together

Actually, I don't think Marxist writing suggests a dual systems approach. There is too much focus on patriarchy arising with the dawn of class society to suggest separate systems. It would be more logical to ask how different class societies refashion the family and reshape women's work for its particular needs.

How do families of different classes take on different functions? How does the male's superior status within the family reproduce itself? What can we learn from looking at the other categories of oppression to see how they operate similarly and differently?

Vogel believes we can find important theoretical concepts scattered throughout the writings of the classic Marxists

writers, but I would caution that we need to realize that there has been an evolution of working-class families and women's roles over the last 100+ years. Certainly in a globalized and neoliberal world, the push/pull factors on the family have changed.

Expectations and fears of women's changing roles have evolved as well. Issues that once didn't even have a name are widely discussed âEuros" whether we are talking about women in non-traditional jobs, date rape, domestic abuse, civil rights or reproductive justice.

This is not to say that women's status has been steadily progressing. Rather, there have been steps forward and steps backward. For example, many wonder why, more than 40 years after the U.S. Supreme Court swept away much anti-abortion legislation with the Roe v. Wade decision, we still face a constant barrage of restrictive legislation.

If we understand, however, that underlying the idea of capitalism's formal equality there are structures of domination based on class, race, sex âEuros" and even perceived differences such as gender normative or ableness assumptions âEuros" we can understand the reason for the continued assault as a form of class struggle.

Another part of the history we need to evaluate is what Vogel (writing in 1983) discusses as the practices of "socialist" societies. Most of those countries have since reverted to capitalist relations and the small advances women made have been reversed. But none of these post-capitalist societies were ever beacons of hope because a ruling elite prevented the working class from organizing itself independently.

I also found that where Vogel emphasized theoretical weaknesses within the Marxist tradition, she generally minimized the importance of their writings on women's emotional and physical lives. I have always been proud of the fact that socialists recognized the enormous burden and disappointment in women's lives.

Lise Vogel's impressive attempt to re-evaluate the Marxist tradition points toward a comprehensive theory rooted in women's role within the family. It takes familiar Marxist concepts and makes clear how they are building blocks in theorizing women's secondary status. It is weaker about examining the evolution of the family, or articulating a program or strategies.

In "Beyond Domestic Labor" she does make the valid point that "the family is neither wholly a pillar of defense and solidarity for the working class, as some socialists would have it, nor an institution so torn by internal struggle and male domination that it must be abolished, as some socialists feminists might argue." (177)

I agree that socializing what is still mainly women's work within the home is essential. In fact, socialists don't just want child care, we want quality child care. But I believe it is also necessary to raise the issue of reducing the work week as a method of challenging the profit system and reconceptualizing what is beneficial to society.

Vogel identifies the failure to examine the working-class family under capitalism as a hole in Marxist theorization. This also leads her to state that Marx and Engels didn't anticipate the capacity of male supremacy to grow within the working class. Being attentive to the reproduction of male privilege is certainly an issue we need to understand theoretically and historically. That is, there is a whole constellation of institutions and practices that teach hierarchy.

How will a socialist movement be able to ensure that whatever family form might continue to exist be able to overturn patriarchal structures that have persisted for thousands of years? Here I can only suggest that the continued existence of women's self-organization and socialist awareness will need to build structures that undermine such elitist views.